The RUSTLER of WIND RIVER

G. W. Ogden

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WITH FRONTISPIECE
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	Strange Bargainings	1
II	Beef Day	11
III	The Ranchhouse by the River	28
IV	The Man in the Plaid	41
V	If He was a Gentleman	55
VI	A Bold Civilian	66
VII	Throwing the Scare	81
VIII	Afoot and Alone	89
IX	Business, not Company	102
X	"Hell's a-goin' to Pop"	119
XI	The Señor Boss Comes Riding	131
XII	"The Rustlers!"	147
XIII	The Trail at Dawn	160
XIV	When Friends Part	182
XV	One Road	196
XVI	Danger and Dignity	215
XVII	Boots and Saddles	227
XVIII	The Trail of the Coffee	240
XIX	"I Beat Him to It"	252
XX	Love and Death	268
XXI	The Man in the Door	280
XXII	Paid	298
XXIII	Tears in the Night	303
XXIV	Banjo Faces into the West	312
XXV	"Hasta Luego"	322

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CHAPTER I

STRANGE BARGAININGS

WHEN a man came down out of the mountains looking dusty and gaunt as the stranger did, there was no marvel in the matter of his eating five cans of cove oysters. The one unaccountable thing about it was that Saul Chadron, president of the Drovers' Association, should sit there at the table and urge the lank, lean starveling to go his limit.

Usually Saul Chadron was a man who picked his companions, and was a particular hand at the choosing. He could afford to do that, being of the earth's exalted in the Northwest, where people came to him and put down their tribute at his feet.

This stranger, whom Chadron treated like a long-wandering friend, had come down the mountain trail that morning, and had been hanging about the hotel all day. Buck Snellin, the proprietor — duly licensed for a matter of thirty years past by the United States government to conduct his hostelry in the corner of the Indian reservation, up against the

door of the army post — did not know him. That threw him among strangers in that land, indeed, for Buck knew everybody within a hundred miles on every side.

The stranger was a tall, smoky man, hollow-faced, grim; adorned with a large brown mustache which drooped over his thin mouth; a bony man with sharp shoulders, and a stoop which began in the region of the stomach, as if induced by drawing in upon himself in times of poignant hunger, which he must have felt frequently in his day to wear him down to that state of bones; with the under lid of his left eye caught at a point and drawn down until it showed red, as if held by a fishhook to drain it of unimaginable tears.

There was a furtive look in his restless, wild-animal eyes, smoky like the rest of him, and a surliness about his long, high-ridged nose which came down over his mustache like a beak. He wore a cloth cap with ear flaps, and they were down, although the heat of summer still made the September air lively enough for one with blood beneath his skin. He regaled himself with fierce defiance, like a captive eagle, and had no word in return for the generous importunities of the man who was host to him in what evidently was a long-deferred meal.

Chadron paid the bill when the man at last finished packing his internal cavities, and they went together into the hotel office which adjoined the dining-room.

The office of this log hotel was a large, gaunt

room, containing a few chairs along the walls, a small, round table under the window with the register upon it, a pen in a potato, and a bottle of ink with trickled and encrusted sides. The broad fireplace was bleak and black, blank-staring as a blind eye, and the sun reached through the window in a white streak across the mottled floor.

There was the smell of old pipes, old furs, old guns, in the place, and all of them were present to account for themselves and dispel any shadow of mystery whatever — the guns on their pegs set in auger-holes in the logs of the walls, the furs of wild beasts dangling from like supports in profusion everywhere, and the pipes lying on the mantel with stems hospitably extended to all unprovided guests. Some of them had been smoked by the guests who had come and gone for a generation of men.

The stranger stood at the manteltree and tried the pipes' capacity with his thick-ended thumb, finding one at last to his requirements. Tall as Saul Chadron stood on his own proper legs, the stranger at his shoulder was a head above him. Seven feet he must have towered, his crown within a few inches of the smoked beams across the ceiling, and marvelously thin in the running up. It seemed that the wind must break him some blustering day at that place in his long body where hunger, or pain, or mischance had doubled him over in the past, and left him creased. The strong light of the room found pepperings of gray in his thick and long black hair.

Chadron himself was a gray man, with a mustache and beard like a cavalier. His shrewd eyes were sharp and bright under heavy brows, his brown face was toughened by days in the saddle through all seasons of weather and wind. His shoulders were broad and heavy, and even now, although not dressed for the saddle, there was an up-creeping in the legs of his trousers, and a gathering at the knees of them, for they were drawn down over his tall boots.

That was Chadron's way of doing the nice thing when he went abroad in his buckboard. He had saddle manners and buckboard manners, and even office manners when he met the cattle barons in Cheyenne. No matter what manners he chanced to be wearing, one remembered Saul Chadron after meeting him, and carried the recollection of him to the sundown of his day.

"We can talk here," said Chadron, giving the other a cigar.

The tall man broke the cigar and ground part of it in his palm, looking with frowning thoughtfulness into the empty fireplace as the tobacco crushed in his hard hand. He filled the pipe that he had chosen, and sat with his long legs stretched out toward the chimney-mouth.

"Well, go on and talk," said he.

His voice came smothered and hoarse, as if it lay beneath all the oysters which he had rammed into his unseen hollow. It was a voice in strange harmony with the man, such a sound as one would have

expected to come out of that surly, dark-lipped, thin mouth. There was nothing committal about it, nothing exactly identifying; an impersonal voice, rather, and cold; a voice with no conscience behind it, scarcely a soul.

"You're a business man, Mark —"

"Huh!" said Mark, grunting a little cloud of smoke from the bowl of his pipe in his sarcastic vehemence.

"And so am I," continued Chadron, unmoved. "Words between us would be a waste of time."

"You're right; money talks," said Mark.

"It's a man's job, or I wouldn't have called you out of your hole to do it," said Chadron, watching the man slyly for the effect.

"Pay me in money," suggested Mark, unwarmed by the compliment. "Is it nesters ag'in?"

"Nesters," nodded the cattleman, drawing his great brows in a frown. "They're crowdin' in so thick right around me that I can't breathe comfortable any more; the smell of 'em's in the wind. They're runnin' over three of the biggest ranches up here besides the Alamito, and the Drovers' Association wants a little of your old-time holy scare throwed into the cussed coyotes."

Mark nodded in the pause which seemed to have been made for him to nod, and Chadron went on.

"We figger that if a dozen or two of 'em's cleaned out, quick and mysterious, the rest'll tuck tail and sneak. It's happened that way in other places more

than once, as you and I know. Well, you're the man that don't have to take lessons."

"Money talks," repeated Mark, still looking into the chimney.

"There's about twenty of them that counts, the rest's the kind you can drive over a cliff with a whip. These fellers has strung their cussed bob-wire fences crisscross and checkerboard all around there up the river, and they're gittin' to be right troublesome. Of course they're only a speck up there yet, but they'll multiply like fleas on a hot dog if we let 'em go ahead. You know how it is."

There was a conclusiveness in Chadron's tone as he said that. It spoke of a large understanding between men of a kind.

"Sure," grunted the man Mark, nodding his head at the chimney. "You want a man to work from the willers, without no muss or gun-flashin', or rough houses or loud talk."

"Twenty of them, their names are here, and some scattered in between that I haven't put down, to be picked up as they fall in handy, see?"

"And you're aimin' to keep clear, and stand back in the shadder, like you always have done," growled Mark. "Well, I ain't goin' to ram my neck into no sheriff's loop for nobody's business but my own from now on. I'm through with resks, just to be obligin'."

"Who'll put a hand on you in this country unless we give the word?" Chadron asked, severely.

"How do I know who's runnin' the law in this dang country now? Maybe you fellers is, maybe you ain't."

"There's no law in this part of the country bigger than the Drovers' Association," Chadron told him, frowning in rebuke of Mark's doubt of security. "Well, maybe there's a little sheriff here and there, and a few judges that we didn't put in, but they're down in the farmin' country, and they don't cut no figger at all. If you *was* fool enough to let one of them fellers git a hold on you we wouldn't leave you in jail over night. You know how it was up there in the north."

"But I don't know how it is down here." Mark scowled in surly unbelief, or surly simulation.

"There's not a judge, federal or state, that could carry a bale of hay anywhere in the cattle country, I tell you, Mark, that we don't draw the chalk line for."

"Then why don't you do the job yourselves, 'stead of callin' a peaceable man away from his ranchin'?"

"You're one kind of a gentleman, Mark, and I'm another, and there's different jobs for different men. That ain't my line."

"Oh hell!" said Mark, laying upon the words an eloquent stress.

"All you've got to do is keep clear of the reservation; don't turn a card here, no matter how easy it looks. We can't jerk you out of the hands of the army if you git mixed up with it; that's one place

where we stop. The reservation's a middle ground where we meet the nesters — rustlers, every muddy-bellied wolf of 'em, and we can prove it — and pass 'em by. They come and go here like white men, and nothing said. Keep clear of the reservation; that's all you've got to do to be as safe as if you was layin' in bed on your ranch up in Jackson's Hole."

Chadron winked as he named that refuge of the hunted in the Northwest. Mark appeared to be considering something weightily.

"Oh, well, if they're rustlers — nobody ain't got no use for a rustler," he said.

"There's men in that bunch of twenty" — tapping the slip of paper with his finger — "that started with two cows a couple of years ago that's got fifty and sixty head of two-year-olds now," Chadron feelingly declared.

"How much're you willin' to go?" Mark put the question with a suddenness which seemed to betray that he had been saving it to shoot off that way, as a disagreeable point over which he expected a quarrel. He squinted his draggled left eye at Chadron, as if he was taking aim, while he waited for a reply.

"Well, you have done it for fifty a head," Chadron said.

"Things is higher now, and I'm older, and the resk's bigger," Mark complained. "How fur apart do they lay?"

"You ought to get around in a week or two."

"But that ain't figgerin' the time a feller has to

lay out in the bresh waitin' and takin' rheumatiz in his j'ints. I couldn't touch the job for the old figger; things is higher."

"Look here, Mark"—Chadron opened the slip which he had wound round his finger—"this one is worth ten, yes, all, the others. Make your own price on him. But I want it *done;* no bungled job."

Mark took the paper and laid his pipe aside while he studied it.

"Macdonald?"

"Alan Macdonald," nodded Chadron. "That feller's opened a ditch from the river up there on my land and begun to *irrigate!*"

"Irrigatin', huh?" said Mark, abstractedly, moving his finger down the column of names.

"He makes a blind of buyin' up cattle and fattenin' 'em on the hay and alfalfer he's raisin' up there on my good land, but he's the king-pin of the rustlers in this corner of the state. He'll be in here tomorrow with cattle for the Indian agent — it's beef day — and you can size him up. But you've got to keep your belly to the ground like a snake when you start anything on that feller, and you've got to make sure you've got him dead to rights. He's quick with a gun, and he's sure."

"Five hundred?" suggested Mark, with a crafty sidelong look.

"You've named it."

"And something down for expenses; a feller's got to live, and livin's high."

Chadron drew out his wallet. Money passed into Mark's hand, and he put it away in his pocket along with the list of names.

"I'll see you in the old place in Cheyenne for the settlement, if you make good," Chadron told him.

Mark waved his hand in lofty depreciation of the hint that failure for him was a possible contingency. He said no more. For a little while Chadron stood looking down on him as he leaned with his pipe over the dead ashes in the fireplace, his hand in the breast of his coat, where he had stored his purse. Mark treated the mighty cattleman as if he had become a stranger to him, along with the rest of the world in that place, and Chadron turned and went his way.

CHAPTER II

BEEF DAY

FORT SHAKIE was on its downhill way in those days, and almost at the bottom of the decline. It was considered a post of penance by enlisted men and officers alike, nested up there in the high plateau against the mountains in its place of wild beauty and picturesque charm.

But natural beauty and Indian picturesqueness do not fill the place in the soldierly breast of fair civilian lady faces, nor torrential streams of cold mountain water supply the music of the locomotive's toot. Fort Shakie was being crept upon by civilization, true, but it was coming all too slow for the booted troopers and belted officers who must wear away the months in its lonely silences.

Within the memory of officers not yet gray the post had been a hundred and fifty miles from a railroad. Now it was but twenty; but even that short leap drowned the voice of the locomotive, and the dot at the rails' end held few of the endearments which make soldiering sweet.

Soon the post must go, indeed, for the need of it had passed. The Shoshones, Arapahoes, and Crows had forgotten their old animosities, and were traveling with Buffalo Bill, going to college, and raising alfalfa under the direction of a government farmer.

The Indian police were in training to do the soldiers' work there. Soon the post must stand abandoned, a lonely monument to the days of hard riding, long watches, and bleak years. Not a soldier in the service but prayed for the hastening of the day.

No, there was not much over at Meander, at the railroad's end, to cheer a soldier's heart. It was an inspiring ride, in these autumn days, to come to Meander, past the little brimming lakes, which seemed to lie without banks in the green meadows where wild elk fed with the shy Indian cattle; over the white hills where the earth gave under the hoofs like new-fallen snow. But when one came to it through the expanding, dusty miles, the reward of his long ride was not in keeping with his effort.

Certainly, privates and subalterns could get drunk there, as speedily as in the centers of refinement, but there were no gentlemanly diversions at which an officer could dispel the gloom of his sour days in garrison.

The rough-cheeked girls of that high-wind country were well enough for cowboys to swing in their wild dances; just a rung above the squaws on the reservation in the matter of loquacity and of gum. Hardly the sort for a man who had the memory of white gloves and gleaming shoulders, and the traditions of the service to maintain.

Of course there was the exception of Nola Chadron, but she was not of Meander and the railroad's end, and she came only in flashes of summer

brightness, like a swift, gay bird. But when Nola was at the ranchhouse on the river the gloom lifted over the post, and the sour leaven in the hearts of unmarried officers became as sweet as manna in the cheer of the unusual social outlet thus provided.

Nola kept the big house in a blaze of joy while she nested there through the summer days. The sixteen miles which stretched between it and the post ran out like a silver band before those who rode into the smile of her welcome, and when she flitted away to Cheyenne, champagne, and silk hats in the autumn, a grayness hovered again over the military post in the corner of the reservation.

Later than usual Nola had lingered on this fall, and the social outlet had remained open, like a navigable river over which the threat of ice hung but had not yet fallen. There were not lacking those who held that the lodestone which kept her there at the ranchhouse, when the gaieties of the season beckoned elsewhere, was in the breast of Major Cuvier King. Fatal infatuation, said the married ladies at the post, knowing, as everybody knew in the service, that Major King was betrothed to Frances Landcraft, the colonel's daughter.

No matter for any complications which might come of it, Nola had remained on, and the major had smiled on her, and ridden with her, and cut high capers in the dance, all pending the return of Frances and her mother from their summering at Bar Harbor in compliance with the family traditions.

Now Frances was back again, and fortune had thrown a sunburst of beauty into the post by centering her and Nola here at once. Nola was the guest of the colonel's daughter, and there were flutterings in uniformed breasts.

Beef day was an event at the agency which never grew old to the people at the post. Without beef day they must have dwindled off to acidulous shadows, as the Indians who depended upon it for more solid sustenance would have done in the event of its discontinuation by a paternal government.

There were phases of Indian life and character which one never saw save on beef day, which fell on Wednesday of each week. Guests at the post watched the bright picture with the keen interest of a pageant on the stage; tourists came over by stage from Meander in the summer months by the score to be present; the resident officers, and their wives and families — such as had them — found in it an ever-recurring source of interest and relief from the tedium of days all alike.

This beef day, the morning following the meeting between Saul Chadron and his mysterious guest, a chattering group stood on the veranda of Colonel Landcraft's house in the bright friendly sun. They were waiting for horses to make the short journey to the agency — for one's honesty was questioned, his sanity doubted, if he went afoot in that country even a quarter of a mile — and gayest among them was Nola Chadron, the sun in her fair, springing hair.

Nola's crown reached little higher than a proper soldier's heart, but what she lacked in stature she supplied in plastic perfection of body and vivacity of face. There was a bounding joyousness of life in her; her eager eyes reflecting only the anticipated pleasures of today. There was no shadow of yesterday's regret in them, no cloud of tomorrow's doubt.

On the other balance there was Frances Landcraft, taller by half a head, soldierly, too, as became her lineage, in the manner of lifting her chin in what seemed a patrician scorn of small things such as a lady should walk the world unconscious of. The brown in her hair was richer than the clear agate of her eyes; it rippled across her ear like the scroll of water upon the sand.

There was a womanly dignity about her, although the threshold of girlhood must not have been far behind her that bright autumnal morning. Her nod was equal to a stave of Nola's chatter, her smile worth a league of the light laughter from that bounding little lady's lips. Not that she was always so silent as on that morning, there among the young wives of the post, at her own guest's side. She had her hours of overflowing spirits like any girl, but in some company she was always grave.

When Major King was in attendance, especially, the seeing ones made note. And there were others, too, who said that she was by nature a colonel among women, haughty, cold and aloof. These wondered how the major ever had made headway with her up to

the point of gaining her hand. Knowing ones smiled at that, and said it had been arranged.

There were ambitions on both sides of that match, it was known — ambition on the colonel's part to secure his only child a station of dignity, and what he held to be of consequence above all achievements in the world. Major King was a rising man, with two friends in the cabinet. It was said that he would be a brigadier-general before he reached forty.

On the major's side, was the ambition to strengthen his political affiliations by alliance with a family of patrician strain, together with the money that his bride would bring, for Colonel Landcraft was a weighty man in this world's valued accumulations. So the match had been arranged.

The veranda of the colonel's house gave a view of the parade grounds and the long avenue that came down between the officers' houses, cottonwoods lacing their limbs above the road. There was green in the lawns, the flash of flowers between the leaves and shrubs, white-gleaming walls, trim walks, shorn hedges. It seemed a pleasant place of quiet beauty that bright September morning, and a pity to give it up by and by to dust and desolation; a place where men and women might be happy, but for the gnawing fire of ambition in their hearts.

Mrs. Colonel Landcraft was not going. Indians made her sick, she said, especially Indians sitting around in the tall grass waiting for the carcasses to be cut up and apportioned out to them in bloody

chunks. But there seemed to be another source of her sickness that morning, measuring by the grave glances with which she searched her daughter's face. She wondered whether the major and Frances had quarreled; and if so, whether Nola Chadron had been the cause.

They were off, with the colonel and a lately-assigned captain in the lead. There was a keener pleasure in this beef day than usual for the colonel, for he had new ground to sow with its wonders, which were beginning to pale in his old eyes which had seen so much of the world.

"Very likely we'll see the minister's wife there," said he, as they rode forward, "and if so, it will be worth your while to take special note of her. St. John Mathews, the Episcopalian minister over there at the mission — those white buildings there among the trees — is a full-blooded Crow. One of the pioneer missionaries took him up and sent him back East to school, where in time he entered the ministry and married this white girl. She was a college girl, I've been told, glamoured by the romance of Mathews' life. Well, it was soon over."

The colonel sighed, and fell silent. The captain, feeling that it was intended that he should, made polite inquiry.

"The trouble is that Mathews is an Indian out of his place," the colonel resumed. "He returned here twenty years or so ago, and took up his work among his people. But as he advanced toward civilization,

his wife began to slip back. Little by little she adopted the Indian ways and dress, until now you couldn't tell her from a squaw if you were to meet her for the first time. She presents a curious psychological study — or perhaps biological example of atavism, for I believe there's more body than soul in the poor creature now. It's nature maintaining the balance, you see. He goes up; she slips back.

"If she's there, she'll be squatting among the squaws, waiting to carry home her husband's allotment of warm, bloody beef. She doesn't have to do it, and it shames and humiliates Mathews, too, even though they say she cuts it up and divides it among the poorer Indians. She's a savage; her eyes sparkle at the sight of red meat."

They rounded the agency buildings and came upon an open meadow in which the slaughterhouses stood at a distance from the road. Here, in the grassy expanse, the Indians were gathered, waiting the distribution of the meat. The scene was barbarically animated. Groups of women in their bright dresses sat here and there on the grass, and apart from them in gravity waited old men in moccasins and blankets and with feathers in their hair. Spry young men smoked cigarettes and talked volubly, garbed in the worst of civilization and the most useless of savagery.

One and all they turned their backs upon the visitors, the nearest groups and individuals moving away from them with the impassive dignity of their race. There is more scorn in an Indian squaw's back,

turned to an impertinent stranger, than in the faces of six matrons of society's finest-sifted under similar conditions.

Colonel Landcraft led his party across the meadow, entirely unconscious of the cold disdain of the people whom he looked down upon from his superior heights. He could not have understood if any there had felt the trespass from the Indians' side — and there was one, very near and dear to the colonel who felt it so — and attempted to explain. The colonel very likely would have puffed up with military consequence almost to the bursting-point.

Feeling, delicacy, in those smeared, smelling creatures! Surliness in excess they might have, but dignity, not at all. Were they not there as beggars to receive bounty from the government's hand?

"Oh, there's Mrs. Mathews!" said Nola, with the eagerness of a child who has found a quail's nest in the grass. She was off at an angle, like a hunter on the scent. Colonel Landcraft and his guest followed with equal rude eagerness, and the others swept after them, Frances alone hanging back. Major King was at Nola's side. If he noted the lagging of his fiancée he did not heed.

The minister's wife, a shawl over her head, her braided hair in front of her shoulders like an Indian woman, rose from her place in startled confusion. She looked as if she would have fled if an avenue had been open, or a refuge presented. The embarrassed creature was obliged to stand in their curious eyes,

and stammer in a tongue which seemed to be growing strange to her from its uncommon use.

She was a short woman, growing heavy and shapeless now, and there was gray in her black hair. Her skin was browned by sun, wind, and smoke to the hue of her poor neighbors and friends. When she spoke in reply to the questions which poured upon her, she bent her head like a timid girl.

Frances checked her horse and remained behind, out of range of hearing. She was cut to the heart with shame for her companions, and her cheek burned with the indignation that she suffered with the harried woman in their midst. A little Indian girl came flying past, ducking and dashing under the neck of Frances' horse, in pursuit of a piece of paper which the wind whirled ahead of her. At Frances' stirrup she caught it, and held it up with a smile.

"Did you lose this, lady?" she asked, in the very best of mission English.

"No," said Frances, bending over to see what it might be. The little girl placed it in her hand and scurried away again to a beckoning woman, who stood on her knees and scowled over her offspring's dash into the ways of civilized little girls.

It was a narrow strip of paper that she had rescued from the wind, with the names of several men written on it in pencil, and at the head of the list the name of Alan Macdonald. Opposite that name some crude hand had entered, with pen that had flowed heavily under his pressure, the figures "$500."

Frances turned it round her finger and sat waiting for the others to leave off their persecution of the minister's wife and come back to her, wondering in abstracted wandering of mind who Alan Macdonald might be, and for what purpose he had subscribed the sum of five hundred dollars.

"I think she's the most romantic little thing in the world!" Nola was declaring, in her extravagant surface way as they returned to where Frances sat her horse, her wandering eyes on the blue foothills, the strip of paper prominent about her finger. "Oh, honey! what's the matter? Did you cut your finger?"

"No," said Frances, her serious young face lighting with a smile, "it's a little subscription list, or something, that somebody lost. Alan Macdonald heads it for five hundred dollars. Do you know Alan Macdonald, and what his charitable purpose may be?"

Nola tossed her head with contemptuous sniff.

"They call him the 'king of the rustlers' up the river," said she.

"Oh, he *is* a man of consequence, then?" said Frances, a quickening of humor in her brown eyes, seeing that Nola was up on her high horse about it.

"We'd better be going down to the slaughter-house if we want to see the fun," bustled the colonel, wheeling his horse. "I see a movement setting in that way."

"He's just a common thief!" declared Nola, with

flushed cheek and resentful eye, as Frances fell in beside her for the march against the abattoir.

Frances still carried the paper twisted about her finger, reserving her judgment upon Alan Macdonald, for she knew something of the feuds of that hard-speaking land.

"Anyway, I suppose he'd like to have his paper back," she suggested. "Will you hand it to him the next time you meet him?"

Frances was entirely grave about it, although it was only a piece of banter which she felt that Nola would appreciate. But Nola was not in appreciative mood, for she was a full-blooded daughter of the baronial rule. She jerked her head like a vicious bronco and reined hurriedly away from Frances as she extended the paper.

"I'll not touch the thing!" said Nola, fire in her eyes.

Major King was enjoying the passage between the girls, riding at Nola's side with his cavalry hands held precisely.

"If I'm not mistaken, the gentleman in question is there talking to Miller, the agent," said he, nodding toward two horsemen a little distance ahead. "But I wouldn't excite him, Miss Landcraft, if I were you. He's said to be the quickest and deadliest man with a weapon on this range."

Major King smiled over his own pleasantry. Frances looked at Nola with brows lifted inquiringly, as if waiting her verification. Then the grave young

lady settled back in her saddle and laughed merrily, reaching across and touching her friend's arm in conciliating caress.

"Oh, you delightful little savage!" she said. "I believe you'd like to take a shot at poor Mr. Macdonald yourself."

"We never start anything on the reservation," Nola rejoined, quite seriously.

Miller, the Indian agent, rode away and left Macdonald sitting there on his horse as the military party approached. He spurred up to meet the colonel, and to present his respects to the ladies — a hard matter for a little round man with a tight paunch, sitting in a Mexican saddle. The party halted, and Frances looked across at Macdonald, who seemed to be waiting for Miller to rejoin him.

Macdonald was a supple, sinewy man, as he appeared across the few rods intervening. His coat was tied with his slicker at the cantle of his saddle, his blue flannel shirt was powdered with the white dust of the plain. Instead of the flaring neckerchief which the cowboys commonly favored, Macdonald wore a cravat, the ends of it tucked into the bosom of his shirt, and in place of the leather chaps of men who ride breakneck through brush and bramble, his legs were clad in tough brown corduroys, and fended by boots to his knees. There were revolvers in the holsters at his belt.

Not an unusual figure for that time and place, but something uncommon in the air of unbending

severity that sat on him, which Frances felt even at that distance. He looked like a man who had a purpose in his life, and who was living it in his own brave way. If he was a cattle thief, as charged, thought she, then she would put her faith against the world that he was indeed a master of his trade.

They were talking around Miller, who was going to give them places of vantage for the coming show. Only Frances and Major King were left behind, where she had stopped her horse to look curiously across at Alan Macdonald, king of the rustlers, as he was called.

"It may not be anything at all to him, and it may be something important," said Frances, reaching out the slip to Major King. "Would you mind handing it to him, and explaining how it came into my hands?"

"I'll not have anything to do with the fellow!" said the major, flushing hotly. "How can you ask such a thing of *me?* Throw it away, it's no concern of yours — the memorandum of a cattle thief!"

Frances drew herself straight. Her imperious chin was as high as Major King ever had carried his own in the most self-conscious moment of his military career.

"Will you take it to him?" she demanded.

"Certainly not!" returned the major, haughtily emphatic. Then, softening a little, "Don't be silly, Frances; what a row you make over a scrap of blowing paper!"

"Then I'll take it myself!"

"Miss Landcraft!"

"*Major* King!"

It was the steel of conventionality against the flint of womanly defiance. Major King started in his saddle, as if to reach out and restrain her. It was one of those defiantly foolish little things which women and men — especially women — do in moments of pique, and Frances knew it at the time. But she rode away from the major with a hot flush of insubordination in her cheeks, and Alan Macdonald quickened from his pensive pose when he saw her coming.

His hand went to his hat when her intention became unmistakable to him. She held the little paper out toward him while still a rod away.

"A little Indian girl gave me this; she found it blowing along — they tell me you are Mr. Macdonald," she said, her face as serious as his own. "I thought it might be a subscription list for a church, or something, and that you might want it."

"Thank you, Miss Landcraft," said he, his voice low-modulated, his manner easy.

Her face colored at the unexpected way of this man without a coat, who spoke her name with the accent of refinement, just as if he had known her, and had met her casually upon the way.

"I have seen you a hundred times at the post and the agency," he explained, to smooth away her confusion. "I have seen you from afar."

"Oh," said she, as lame as the word was short.

He was scanning the written paper. Now he looked at her, a smile waking in his eyes. It moved in slow illumination over his face, but did not break his lips, pressed in their stern, strong line. She saw that his long hair was light, and that his eyes were gray, with sandy brows over them which stood on end at the points nearest his nose, from a habit of bending them in concentration, she supposed, as he had been doing but a moment before he smiled.

"No, it isn't a church subscription, Miss Landcraft, it's for a cemetery," said he.

"Oh," said she again, wondering why she did not go back to Major King, whose horse appeared restive, and in need of the spur, which the major gave him unfeelingly.

At the same time she noted that Alan Macdonald's forehead was broad and deep, for his leather-weighted hat was pushed back from it where his fair, straight hair lay thick, and that his bony chin had a little croft in it, and that his face was long, and hollowed like a student's, and that youth was in his eyes in spite of the experience which hardships of unknown kind had written across his face. Not a handsome man, but a strong one in his way, whatever that way might be.

"I am indebted to you for this," said he, drawing forth his watch with a quick movement as he spoke, opening the back cover, folding the little paper carefully away in it, "and grateful beyond words."

"Good-bye, Mr. Macdonald," said she, wheeling her horse suddenly, smiling back at him as she rode away to Major King.

Alan Macdonald sat with his hat off until she was again at the major's side, when he replaced it over his fair hair with slow hand, as if he had come from some holy presence. As for Frances, her turn of defiance had driven her clouds away. She met the major smiling and radiant, a twinkling of mischief in her lively eyes.

The major was a diplomat, as all good soldiers, and some very indifferent ones, are. Whatever his dignity and gentler feelings had suffered while she was away, he covered the hurt now with a smile.

"And how fares the bandit king this morning?" he inquired.

"He seems to be in spirits," she replied.

The others were out of sight around the buildings where the carcasses of beef had been prepared. Nobody but the major knew of Frances' little dash out of the conventional, and the knowledge that it was so was comfortable in his breast.

"And the pe-apers," said he, in melodramatic whisper, "were they the thieves' muster roll?"

"He isn't a thief," said she, with quiet dignity, "he's a gentleman. Yes, the paper *was* important."

"Ha! the plot deepens!" said Major King.

"It was a matter of life and death," said she, with solemn rebuke for his levity, speaking a truer word than she was aware.

CHAPTER III

THE RANCHHOUSE BY THE RIVER

SAUL CHADRON had built himself into that house. It was a solid and assertive thing of rude importance where it stood in the great plain, the river lying flat before it in its low banks like a gray thread through the summer green. There was a bold front to the house, and a turret with windows, standing like a lighthouse above the sea of meadows in which his thousand-numbered cattle fed.

As white as a dove it sat there among the cottonwoods at the riverside. A stream of water led into its gardens to gladden them and give them life. Years ago, when Chadron's importance was beginning to feel itself strong upon its legs, and when Nola was a little thing with light curls blowing about her blue eyes, the house had grown up under the wand of riches in that barren place.

The post at Fort Shakie had been the nearest neighbor in those days, and it remained the nearest neighbor still, with the exception of one usurper and outcast homesteader, Alan Macdonald by name, who had invaded the land over which Chadron laid his extensive claim. Fifteen miles up the river from the grand white house Macdonald had strung his barbed wire and carried in the irrigation ditch to his alfalfa field. He had chosen the most fertile spot

in the vast plain through which the river swept, and it was in the heart of Saul Chadron's domain.

After the lordly manner of the cattle "barons," as they were called in the Northwest, Chadron set his bounds by mountains and rivers. Twenty-five hundred square miles, roughly measured, lay within his lines, the Alamito Ranch he called it — the Little Cottonwood. He had no more title to that great sweep of land than the next man who might come along, and he paid no rental fee to nation nor state for grazing his herds upon it. But the cattle barons had so apportioned the land between themselves, and Saul Chadron, and each member of the Drovers' Association, had the power of their mighty organization to uphold his hand. That power was incontestable in the Northwest in its day; there was no higher law.

This Alan Macdonald was an unaccountable man, a man of education, it was said, which made him doubly dangerous in Saul Chadron's eyes. Saul himself had come up from the saddle, and he was not strong on letters, but he had seen the power of learning in lawyers' offices, and he respected it, and handled it warily, like a loaded gun.

Chadron had sent his cowboys up the river when Macdonald first came, and tried to "throw a holy scare into him," as he put it. The old formula did not work in the case of the lean, long-jawed, bony-chinned man. He was polite, but obdurate, and his quick gray eyes seemed to read to their inner process

of bluff and bluster as through tissue paper before a lamp. When they had tried to flash their guns on him, the climax of their play, he had beaten them to it. Two of them were carried back to the big ranch-house in blankets, with bullets through their fleshy parts — not fatal wounds, but effective.

The problem of a fighting "nester" was a new one to the cattlemen of that country. For twenty years they had kept that state under the dominion of the steer, and held its rich agricultural and mineral lands undeveloped. The herbage there, curing in the dry suns of summer as it stood on the upland plains, provided winter forage for their herds. There was no need for man to put his hand to the soil and debase himself to a peasant's level when he might live in a king's estate by roaming his herds over the untamed land.

Homesteaders who did not know the conditions drifted there on the westward-mounting wave, only to be hustled rudely away, or to pay the penalty of refusal with their lives. Reasons were not given, rights were not pleaded by the lords of many herds. They had the might to work their will; that was enough.

So it could be understood what indignation mounted in the breast of tough old Saul Chadron when a pigmy homesteader put his firm feet down on the ground and refused to move along at his command, and even fought back to maintain what he claimed to be his rights. It was an unprecedented

stand, a dangerous example. But this nester had held out for more than two years against his forces, armed by some invisible strength, it seemed, guarded against ambuscades and surprises by some cunning sense which led him whole and secure about his nefarious ways.

Not alone that, but other homesteaders had come and settled near him across the river on two other big ranches which cornered there against Chadron's own. These nesters drew courage from Macdonald's example, and cunning from his counsel, and stood against the warnings, persecutions, and attempts at forceful dislodgment. The law of might did not seem to apply to them, and there was no other source equal to the dignity of the Drovers' Association — at least none to which it cared to carry its grievances and air them.

So they cut Alan Macdonald's fences, and other homesteaders' fences, in the night and drove a thousand or two cattle across his fields, trampling the growing grain and forage into the earth; they persecuted him in a score of harassing, quick, and hidden blows. But this homesteader was not to be driven away by ordinary means. Nature seemed to lend a hand to him, he made crops in spite of the cattlemen, and was prospering. He had taken root and appeared determined to remain, and the others were taking deep root with him, and the free, wide range was coming under the menace of the fence and the lowly plow.

That was the condition of things in those fair autumn days when Frances Landcraft returned to the post. The Drovers' Association, and especially the president of it, was being defied in that section, where probably a hundred homesteaders had settled with their families of long-backed sons and daughters. They were but a speck on the land yet, as Chadron had told the smoky stranger when he had engaged him to try his hand at throwing the "holy scare." But they spread far over the upland plain, having sought the most favored spots, and they were a blight and a pest in the eyes of the cattlemen.

Nola had flitted back to the ranchhouse, carrying Frances with her to bring down the curtain on her summer's festivities there in one last burst of joy. The event was to be a masquerade, and everybody from the post was coming, together with the few from Meander who had polish enough to float them, like new needles in a glass of water, through frontier society's depths. Some were coming from Cheyenne, also, and the big house was dressed for them, even to the bank of palms to conceal the musicians, in the polite way that society has of standing something in front of what it cannot well dispense with, yet of which it appears to be ashamed.

It was the afternoon of the festal day, and Nola sighed happily as she stood with Frances in the ballroom, surveying the perfection of every detail. Money could do things away off there in that corner of the world as well as it could do them in Omaha

or elsewhere. Saul Chadron had hothouses in which even oranges and pineapples grew.

Mrs. Chadron was in the living-room, with its big fireplace and homely things, when they came chattering out of the enchanted place. She was sitting by the window which gave her a view of the dim gray road where it came over the grassy swells from Meander and the world, knitting a large blue sock.

Mrs. Chadron was a cow-woman of the unimproved school. She was a heavy feeder on solids, and she liked plenty of chili peppers in them, which combination gave her a waist and a ruddiness of face like a brewer. But she was a good woman in her fashion, which was narrow, and intolerant of all things which did not wear hoofs and horns, or live and grow mighty from the proceeds of them. She never had expanded mentally to fit the large place that Saul had made for her in the world of cattle, although her struggle had been both painful and sincere.

Now she had given it up, and dismissed the troubles of high life from her fat little head, leaving Nola to stand in the door and do the honors with credit to the entire family. She had settled down to her roasts and hot condiments, her knitting and her afternoon naps, as contentedly as an old cat with a singed back under a kitchen stove. She had no desire to go back to the winter home in Cheyenne, with its grandeur, its Chinese cook, and furniture that she was afraid to use. There was no satisfaction in that place for Mrs. Chadron, beyond the

swelling pride of ownership. For comfort, peace, and a mind at ease, give her the ranchhouse by the river, where she could set her hand to a dish if she wanted to, no one thinking it amiss.

"Well, I declare! if here don't come Banjo Gibson!" said she, her hand on the curtain, her red face near the pane like a beacon to welcome the coming guest. There was pleasure in her voice, and anticipation. The blue sock slid from her lap to the floor, forgotten.

"Yes, it's Banjo," said Nola. "I wonder where he's been all summer? I haven't seen him in an age."

"Who is he?" Frances inquired, looking out at the approaching figure.

"The troubadour of the North Platte, I call him," laughed Nola; "the queerest little traveling musician in a thousand miles. He belongs back in the days of romance, when men like him went playing from castle to court — the last one of his kind."

Frances watched him with new interest as he drew up to the big gate, which was arranged with weights and levers so that a horseman could open and close it without leaving the saddle. The troubadour rode a mustang the color of a dry chili pepper, but with none of its spirit. It came in with drooping head, the reins lying untouched on its neck, its mane and forelock platted and adorned fantastically with varicolored ribbons. Rosettes were on the bridle, a fringe of leather thongs along the reins.

The musician himself was scarcely less remarkable

than the horse. He looked at that distance — now being at the gate — to be a dry little man of middle age, with a thirsty look about his throat, which was long, with a lump in it like an elbow. He was a slender man and short, with gloves on his hands, a slight sandy mustache on his lip, and wearing a dun-colored hat tilted a little to one side, showing a waviness almost curly in his glistening black hair. He carried a violin case behind his saddle, and a banjo in a green covering slung like a carbine over his shoulder.

"He'll know where to put his horse," said Mrs. Chadron, getting up with a new interest in life, "and I'll just go and have Maggie stir him up a bite to eat and warm the coffee. He's always hungry when he comes anywhere, poor little man!"

"Can he play that battery of instruments?" Frances asked.

"Wait till you hear him," nodded Nola, a laugh in her merry eyes.

Then they fell to talking of the coming night, and of the trivial things which are so much to youth, and to watching along the road toward Meander for the expected guests from Cheyenne, who were to come up on the afternoon train.

Regaled at length, Banjo Gibson, in the wake of Mrs. Chadron, who presented him with pride, came into the room where the young ladies waited with impatience the waning of the daylight hours. Banjo acknowledged the honor of meeting Miss Landcraft

with extravagant words, which had the flavor of a manual of politeness and a ready letter-writer in them. He was on more natural terms with Nola, having known her since childhood, and he called her "Miss Nola," and held her hand with a tender lingering.

His voice was full and rich, a deep, soft note in it like a rare instrument in tune. His small feet were shod in the shiningest of shoes, which he had given a furbishing in the barn, and a flowing cravat tied in a large bow adorned his low collar. There were stripes in the musician's shirt like a Persian tent, but it was as clean and unwrinkled as if he had that moment put it on.

Banjo Gibson — if he had any other christened name, it was unknown to men — was an original. As Nola had said, he belonged back a few hundred years, when musical proficiency was not so common as now. The profession was not crowded in that country, happily, and Banjo traveled from ranch to ranch carrying cheer and entertainment with him as he passed.

He had been doing that for years, having worked his way westward from Nebraska with the big cattle ranches, and his art was his living. Banjo's arrival at a ranch usually resulted in a dance, for which he supplied the music, and received such compensation as the generosity of the host might fix. Banjo never quarreled over such matters. All he needed was enough to buy cigarettes and shirts.

Banjo seldom played in company with any other musician, owing to certain limitations, which he raised to distinguishing virtues. He played by "air," as he said, despising the unproficiency of all such as had need of looking on a book while they fiddled. Knowing nothing of transposition, he was obliged to tune his banjo — on those rare occasions when he stooped to play "second" at a dance — in the key of each fresh tune. This was hard on the strings, as well as on the patience of the player, and Banjo liked best to go it single-handed and alone.

When he heard that musicians were coming from Cheyenne — a day's journey by train — to play for Nola's ball, his face told that he was hurt, but his respect of hospitality curbed his words. He knew that there was one appreciative ear in the mansion by the river that no amount of "dago fiddlin'" ever would charm and satisfy like his own voice with the banjo, or his little brown fiddle when it gave out the old foot-warming tunes. Mrs. Chadron was his champion in all company, and his friend in all places.

"Well, sakes alive! Banjo, I'm as tickled to see you as if you was one of my own folks," she declared, her face as warm as if she had just gorged on the hottest of hot dishes which her Mexican cook, Maggie, could devise.

"I'm glad to be able to make it around ag'in, thank you, mom," Banjo assured her, sentiment and soul behind the simple words. "I always carry a warm place in my heart for Alamito wherever I may stray."

Nola frisked around and took the banjo from its green cover, talking all the time, pushing and placing chairs, and settling Banjo in a comfortable place. Then she armed him with the instrument, making quite a ceremony of it, and asked him to play.

Banjo twanged the instrument into tune, hooked the toe of his left foot behind the forward leg of his chair, and struck up a song which he judged would please the young ladies. Of Mrs. Chadron he was sure; she had laughed over it a hundred times. It was about an adventure which the bard had shared with his gal in a place designated in Banjo's uncertain vocabulary as "the big cook-quari-um." It began:

> Oh-h-h, I stopped at a big cook-quari-um
> Not very long ago,
> To see the bass and suckers
> And hear the white whale blow.

The chorus of it ran:

> Oh-h-h-h, the big sea-line he howled and
> he growled,
> The seal beat time on a drum;
> The whale he swallered a den-vereel
> In the big cook-quari-um.

From that one Banjo passed to "The Cowboy's Lament," and from tragedy to love. There could be nothing more moving — if not in one direction, then in another — than the sentimental expression of Banjo's little sandy face as he sang:

I know you were once my true-lov-o-o-o,
But such a thing it has an aind;
My love and my transpo'ts are ov-o-o-o,
But you may still be my fraind-d-d.

Sundown was rosy behind the distant mountains, a sea of purple shadows laved their nearer feet, when Banjo got out his fiddle at Mrs. Chadron's request and sang her "favorite" along with the moving tones of that instrument.

Dau-ling I am growing-a o-o-eld,
Seel-vo threads *a*-mong tho go-o-ld —

As he sang, Nola slipped from the room. He was finishing when she sped by the window and came sparkling into the room with the announcement that the guests from far Cheyenne were coming. Frances was up in excitement; Mrs. Chadron searched the floor for her unfinished sock.

"What was that flashed a-past the winder like a streak a minute ago?" Banjo inquired.

"Flashed by the window?" Nola repeated, puzzled.

Frances laughed, the two girls stopping in the door, merriment gleaming from their young faces like rays from irridescent gems.

"Why, that was Nola," Frances told him, curious to learn what the sentimental eyes of the little musician foretold.

"I thought it was a star from the sky," said Banjo, sighing softly, like a falling leaf.

As they waited at the gate to welcome the guests,

who were cantering up with a curtain of dust behind them, they laughed over Banjo's compliment.

"I knew there was something behind those eyes," said Frances.

"No telling how long he's been saving it for a chance to work it off on somebody," Nola said. "He got it out of a book — the Mexicans all have them, full of *brindies*, what we call toasts, and silly soft compliments like that."

"I've seen them, little red books that they give for premiums with the Mexican papers down in Texas," Frances nodded, "but Banjo didn't get that out of a book — it was spontaneous."

"I must write it down, and compare it with the next time he gets it off."

"Give him credit for the way he delivered it, no matter where he got it," Frances laughed. "Many a more sophisticated man than your desert troubadour would have broken his neck over that. He's in love with you, Nola — didn't you hear him sigh?"

"Oh, he has been ever since I was old enough to take notice of it," returned Nola, lightly.

"Oh, my luv's like a falling star," paraphrased Frances.

"Not much!" Nola denied, more than half serious. "Venus is ascendant; you keep your eye on her and see."

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN THE PLAID

THERE was no mistaking the assiduity with which Major King waited upon Nola Chadron that night at the ball, any more than there was a chance for doubt of that lively little lady's identity. He sought her at the first, and hung by her side through many dances, and promenaded her in the garden walks where Japanese lanterns glimmered dimly in the soft September night, with all the close attention of a farrier cooling a valuable horse.

Perhaps it was punishment — or meant to be — for the insubordination of Frances Landcraft in speaking to the outlawed Alan Macdonald on last beef day. If so, it was systematically and faithfully administered.

Nola was dressed like a cowgirl. Not that there were any cowgirls in that part of the country, or anywhere else, who dressed that way, except at the Pioneer Week celebration at Cheyenne, and in the romantic dramas of the West. But she was so attired, perhaps for the advantage the short skirt gave her handsome ankles — and something in silk stockings which approached them in tapering grace.

She was improving her hour, whether out of exuberant mischief or in deadly earnest the ladies from the post were puzzled to understand, and if headway

toward the already pledged heart of Major King was any indication of it, her star was indeed ascendant.

Frances Landcraft appeared at the ball as an Arabian lady, meaning in her own interpretation of the masking to stand as a representation of the "Thou," who is endearingly and importantly capitalized in the verses of the ancient singer made famous by Irish-English Fitzgerald. Her disguise was sufficient, only that her hair was so richly assertive. There was not any like it in the cattle country; very little like it anywhere. It was a telltale, precious possession, and Major King never could have made good a plea of hidden identity against it in this world.

Frances had consolation enough for his alienation and absence from her side if numbers could compensate for the withdrawal of the fealty of one. She distributed her favors with such judicial fairness that the tongue of gossip could not find a breach. At least until the tall Scotsman appeared, with his defiant red hair and a feather in his bonnet, his plaid fastened across his shoulder with a golden clasp.

Nobody knew when he arrived, or whence. He spoke to none as he walked in grave stateliness among the merry groups, acknowledging bold challenges and gay banterings only with a bow. The ladies from the post had their guesses as to who he might be, and laid cunning little traps to provoke him into betrayal through his voice. As cunningly he evaded

them, with unsmiling courtesy, his steady gray eyes only seeming to laugh at them behind his green mask.

Frances had finished a dance with a Robin Hood — the slender one in billiard-cloth green — there being no fewer than four of them, variously rounded, diversely clad, when the Scot approached her where she stood with her gallant near the musicians' brake of palms.

> A flask of wine, a book of verse — and Thou
> Beside me singing in the wilderness —

said the tall Highlandman, bending over her shoulder, his words low in her ear. "Only I could be happy without the wine," he added, as she faced him in quick surprise.

"Your penetration deserves a reward — you are the first to guess it," said she.

"Three dances, no less," said he, like a usurer demanding his toll.

He offered his arm, and straightway bore her off from the astonished Robin Hood, who stood staring after them, believing, perhaps, that he was the victim of some prearranged plan.

The spirit of his free ancestors seemed to be in the lithe, tall Highlander's feet. There was no dancer equal to him in that room. A thistle on the wind was not lighter, nor a wheeling swallow more graceful in its flight.

Many others stopped their dancing to watch that

pair; whisperings ran round like electrical conjectures. Nola steered Major King near the whirling couple, and even tried to maneuver a collision, which failed.

"Who is that dancing with Frances Landcraft?" she breathed in the major's ear.

"I didn't know it was Miss Landcraft," he replied, although he knew it very well, and resolved to find out who the Scotsman was, speedily and completely.

"My enchanted hour will soon pass," said the Scot, when that dance was done, "and I have been looking the world over for you."

"Dancing all the way?" she asked him lightly.

"Far from it," he answered, his voice still muffled and low.

They were standing withdrawn a little from the press in the room after their second dance, when Major King came by. The major was a cavalier in drooping hat, with white satin cape, and sword by his side, and well enough known to all his friends in spite of the little spat of mustache and beard. As the major passed he jostled the Scot with his shoulder with a rudeness openly intentional.

The major turned, and spoke an apology. Frances felt the Highlander's muscles swell suddenly where her hand lay on his arm, but whatever had sprung into his mind he repressed, and acknowledged the major's apology with a lofty nod.

The music for another dance was beginning, and couples were whirling out upon the floor.

"I don't care to dance again just now, delightfully as you carry a clumsy one like me through — "

"A self-disparagement, even, can't stand unchallenged," he interrupted.

"Mr. Macdonald," she whispered, "your wig is awry."

They were near the door opening to the illumined garden, with its late roses, now at their best, and hydrangea clumps plumed in foggy bloom. They stepped out of the swirl of the dance like particles thrown from a wheel, not missed that moment even by those interested in keeping them in sight.

"You knew me!" said he, triumphantly glad, as they entered the garden's comparative gloom.

"At the first word," said she.

"I came here in the hope that you would know me, and you alone — I came with my heart full of that hope, and you knew me at the first word!"

There was not so much marvel as satisfaction, even pride for her penetration, in it.

"Somebody else may have recognized you, too — that man who brushed against you — "

"He's one of your officers."

"I know — Major King. Do you know him?"

"No, and he doesn't know me. He can have no interest in me at all."

"Very well; set your beautiful red wig straight and then tell me why you wanted to come here among your enemies. It seems to me a hardy challenge, a most unnecessary risk."

"No risk is unnecessary that brings me to you," he said, his voice trembling in earnestness. "I dared to come because I hoped to meet you on equal ground."

"You're a bold man — in more ways than one." She shook her head as in rebuke of his temerity.

"But you don't believe I'm a thief," said he, conclusively.

"No; I have made public denial of it." She laughed lightly, but a little nervously, an uneasiness over her that she could not define.

"An angel has risen to plead for Alan Macdonald, then!"

"Why should you need anybody to plead for you if there's no truth in their charges? What is a man like you doing in this wild place, wasting his life in a land where he isn't wanted?"

They had turned into a path that branched beyond the lanterns. The white gravel from the river bars with which it was paved glimmered among the shadowy shrubs. Macdonald unclasped his plaid from his shoulders and transferred it to hers. She drew it round her, wrapping her arms in it like a squaw, for the wind was coming chill from the mountains now.

"It is soon said," he answered, quite willingly. "I am not hiding under any other man's name — the one they call me by here is my own. I was a 'son of a family,' as they say in Mexico, and looked for distinction, if not glory, in the diplomatic service. Four

years I grubbed, an under secretary in the legation at Mexico City, then served three more as consul at Valparaiso. An engineer who helped put the railroad through this country told me about it down there when the rust of my inactive life was beginning to canker my body and brain. I threw up my chance for diplomatic distinction and came off up here looking for life and adventure, and maybe a copper mine. I didn't find the mine, but I've had some fun with the other two. Sometimes I'd like to lose the adventure part of it now — it gets tiresome to be hunted, after a while."

"What else?" she asked, after a little, seeing that he walked slowly, his head up, his eyes far away on the purple distances of the night, as if he read a dream.

"I settled in this valley quite innocently, as others have done, before and after me, not knowing conditions. You've heard it said that I'm a rustler — "

"King of the rustlers," she corrected.

"Yes, even that. But I am not a rustler. Everybody up here is a rustler, Miss Landcraft, who doesn't belong to, or work for, the Drovers' Association. They can't oust us by merely charging us with homesteading government land, for that hasn't been made a statutory crime yet. They have to make some sort of a charge against us to give the color of justification to the crimes they practice on us, and rustler is the worst one in the cattlemen's dictionary. It stands ahead of murder and arson in

this country. I'm not saying there are no rustlers around the edges of these big ranches, for there are some. But if there are any among the settlers up our way we don't know it — and I think we'd pretty soon find out."

They turned and walked back toward the house.

"I don't see why you should trouble about it; this plainly isn't your place," she said.

"First, I refused to be driven out by Chadron and the rest because the thing got on my mettle. I knew that I was right, and that they were simply stealing the public domain. Then, as I hung on, it became apparent that there was a man's work cut out for somebody up here. I've taken the ready-made job."

"Tell me about it."

"There's a monstrous injustice being practiced, systematically and cruelly, against thousands of homeless people who come to this country in innocent hope every year. They come here believing it's the great big open-handed West they've heard so much about, carrying everything with them that they own. They cut the strings that hold them to the things they know when they face this way, and when they try to settle on the land that is their inheritance, this copper-bottomed combination of stockmen drives them out. If they don't go, they shoot them. You've heard of it."

"Not just that way," said she, thoughtfully.

"No, they never shoot anybody but a rustler, the

way the world hears of it," said he, in resentment. "But they'll hear another story on the outside one of these days. I'm in this fight up to the eyes to break the back of this infernal combination that's choking this state to death. It's the first time in my life that I ever laid my hand to anything for anybody but myself, and I'm going to see it through to daylight."

"But there must be millions behind the cattlemen, Mr. Macdonald."

"There are. It seems just about hopeless that a handful of ragged homesteaders ever can make a stand against them. But they're usurping the public domain, and they'll overreach themselves one of these days. Chadron has title to this homestead, but that's every inch of land that he's got a legal right over. In spite of that, he lays the claim of ownership to the land fifteen miles north of here, where I've nested. He's been telling me for more than two years that I must clear out."

"You could give it up, and go back to your work among men, where it would count," she said.

"There are things here that count. I couldn't put a state on the map — an industrial and progressive one, I mean — back home in Washington, or sitting with my feet on the desk in some sleepy consulate. And I'm going to put this state on the map where it belongs. That's the job that's cut out for me here, Miss Landcraft."

He said it without boast, but with such a stubborn

note of determination that she felt something lift within her, raising her to the plane of his aspirations. She knew that Alan Macdonald was right about it, although the thing that he would do was still dim in her perception.

"Even then, I don't see what a ranch away off up here from anywhere ever will be worth to you, especially when the post is abandoned. You know the department is going to give it up?"

"And then you—" he began in consternation, checking himself to add, slowly, "no, I didn't know that."

"Perhaps in a year."

"It can't make much difference in the value of land up this valley, though," he mused. "When the railroad comes on through—and that will be as soon as we break the strangle hold of Chadron and men like him—this country will develop overnight. There's petroleum under the land up where I am, lying shallow, too. That will be worth something then."

The music of an old-style dance was being played. Now the piping cowboy voice of some range cavalier rose, calling the figures. The two in the garden path turned with one accord and faced away from the bright windows again.

"They'll be unmasking at midnight?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I'm afraid I can't go in again, then. The hour of my enchantment is nearly at its end."

"You shouldn't have come," she chided, yet not in severity, rather in subdued admiration for his reckless bravery. "Suppose they —"

"Mac! O Mac!" called a cautious, low voice from a hydrangea bush close at hand.

"Who's there?" demanded Macdonald, springing forward.

"They're onto you, Mac," answered the voice from the shrub, "they're goin' to do you hurt. They're lookin' for you now!"

There was a little rustling in the leaves as the unseen friend moved away. The voice was the voice of Banjo Gibson, but not even the shadow of the messenger had been seen.

"You should have gone before — hurry!" she whispered in alarm.

"Never mind. It was a risk, and I took it, and I'd take it again tomorrow. It gave me these minutes with you, it was worth —"

"You must go! Where's your horse?"

"Down by the river in the willows. I can get to him, all right."

"They may come any minute, they —"

"No, they're dancing yet. I expected they'd find me out; they know me too well. I'll get a start of them, before they even know I'm gone."

"They may be waiting farther on — why don't you go — go! There — listen!

"They're saddling," he whispered, as low sounds of haste came from the barnyard corral.

"Go — quick!" she urged, flinging his plaid across his arm.

"I'm going — in one moment more. Miss Landcraft, I'll ride away from you tonight perhaps never to see you again, and if I speak impetuously before I leave you, forgive me before you hear the words — they'll not hurt you — I don't believe they'll shame you."

"Don't say anything more, Mr. Macdonald — even this delay may cost your life!"

"They'll kill me if they can; they've tried it more than once. I never know when I ride away whether I'll ever return. It isn't a new experience, just a little graver than usual — only that. I came here tonight because I — I came to — in the hope —" he stammered, putting out his hands as if supplicating her to understand, his plaid falling to the ground.

"Go!" she whispered, her hand on his arm in appeal, standing near him, dangerously near.

"I've got a right to love you — I've got a right!" he said, the torrent of his passion leaping all curbing obstacles of delicacy, confusion, fear. He flung the words from him in wild vehemence, as if they eased a pang.

"No — no, you have no right! you —"

"I'll leave you in a minute, Frances, without the expectation of ever seeing you again — only with the hope. It's mine to love you, mine to have you if I come through this night. If you're pledged to another man it can't be because you love him, and I'll

tear the right away from him — if I come through this night!"

He spoke rapidly, bending so near that his breath moved the hair on her temple. She stood with arms half lifted, her hands clenched, her breath laboring in her bosom. She did not know that love — she had not known that love — could spring up that way, and rage like a flame before a wind.

"If you're pledged to another man, then I'll defy him, man to man — I do defy him, I challenge him!"

As he spoke he stooped, suddenly, like a wind-bent flame, clasped her, kissed her, held her enfolded in his arms one moment against his breast. He released her then, and stepped back, standing tall and silent, as if he waited for her blast of scorn. It did not come. She was standing with hands pressed to her face, as if to cover some shame or sorrow, or ease the throbbing of a soul-deep pain.

The sound of men and horses came from the corral. He stood, waiting for judgment.

"Go now," she said, in a sad, small voice.

"Give me a token to carry away, to tell me I have not broken my golden hope," he said.

"No, I'll give you nothing!" she declared, with the sharpness of one wronged, and helpless of redress. "You have taken too much — you have taken —"

"What?" he asked, as if he exulted in what he heard, his blood singing in his ears.

"Oh, go — go!" she moaned, stripping off one long white glove and throwing it to him.

He caught it, and pressed it to his lips; then snatching off his bonnet, hid it there, and bent among the shrubbery and was gone, as swiftly and silently as a wolf. Frances flew to the house and up the stairs to her room. There she threw up the window and sat panting in it, straining, listening, for sounds from the river road.

From below the voices of the revelers came, and the laughter over the secrets half-guessed before masks were snatched away around the banquet table. There was a dash of galloping hoofs from the corral, the clatter of the closing gate. The sound grew dimmer, was lost, in the sand of the hoof-cut trail.

After a little, a shot! two! a silence; three! and one as if in reply. Frances slipped to her knees beside the open window, a sob as bitter as the pang of death rising from her breast. She prayed that Alan Macdonald might ride fast, and that the vindictive hands of his enemies might be unsteady that night by the gray riverside.

CHAPTER V

IF HE WAS A GENTLEMAN

"DON'T you think we'd better drop it now, Frances, and be good?"

Major King reined his horse near hers as he spoke, and laid his hand on the pommel of her saddle as if he expected to meet other fingers there.

"You puzzle me, Major King," she returned, not willing to understand.

They were bringing up the rear of the tired procession which was returning to the post from the ball. Already the east was quickening. The stars near the horizon were growing pale; the morning wind was moving, with a warmth in it from the low places, like a tide toward the mountains.

"Oh, I mean this play acting of estrangement," said he, impatiently. "Let's forget it — it doesn't carry naturally with either you or me."

"Why, Major King!" Her voice was lively with mild surprise; she was looking at him as if for verification of his words. Then, slowly: "I hadn't thought of any estrangement, I hadn't intended to bring you to task for one flirtatious night. Be sure, sir, if it has given you pleasure, it has brought me no pain."

"You began it," said he, petulantly. It is almost

unbelievable how boyishly silly a full-grown man can be.

"I began it, Major King? It's too early in the morning for a joke!"

"You were wilful and contrary; you *would* speak to the fellow that day."

"Oh!" deprecatingly.

"Never mind it, though. Wilfulness doesn't become either of us, Frances. I've tried my turn at it tonight, and it has left me cold."

"Poor man!" said she, in low voice, like a sigh. Perhaps it was not all for Major King; perhaps not all assumed.

"Let's not quarrel, Frances."

"Not now, I'm too tired for a real good one. Leave it for tomorrow."

He rode on in silence, not sure, maybe, how much of it she meant. Covertly she looked at him now and then, thinking better of him for his ingenuous confession of failure to warm himself at little Nola Chadron's heart-flame. She extended her hand.

"Forgive me, Major King," she said, very softly, not far removed, indeed, from tenderness.

For a little while Major King left his horse to keep the road its own way, his cavalry hands quite regardless of manuals, regulations, and military airs. Both of them were enfolding her one. He might have held it until they reached the post, but that she drew it away.

There were some qualms of uneasiness in her breast

that hour, some upbraidings of conscience for treason to Major King, of whom she had been girlishly fond, girlishly proud, womanly selfish. That quick, wild scene in the garden was not to be put away for all those arraignments of her honest heart, although it seemed impossible, recalled there in the thin hours of that long and eventful night, like something remembered of another, not of herself.

Her cheeks grew hot, her heart leaped again, at the recollection of that strong man's wild, bold words, his defiant kiss upon her lips. She had yielded them in the recklessness of that moment, in the force of his all-carrying demand, when she might have denied them, or sped away from him, as innocence is believed to know from instinct when to fly from a destructive lure.

Closing her eyes against the gray-creeping morning, she saw him again, standing that moment with her glove to his lips; saw him bend and speed away, the cunning of his hunted ancestors in his swift feet and self-eliminating form. A wild fear struck her, a cold dread fell like ashes into her heart, as she wondered how well he had ridden that night, and how far.

Perhaps he was lying in his blood that hour, never to come back to her again. Yet, why should it matter so much to her? Only that it was a gallant life gone out, whatever its faults had been; only the interest that she might have in any man who had danced with her, and told her his story, and spoken

of his designs. So she said, confessing with the same breath that it was a poor, self-deluding lie.

Back again in her home at the post, the day awake around her, reveille sounding in the barracks, she turned the key in her door as if to shut the secret in with her, and bent beneath the strain of her long suspense. She no longer tried to conceal, or to deny to her own heart, the love she bore that man, which had come so suddenly, and so fiercely sweet.

No longer past than the evening before her heart had ached with jealous pain over the little triumph that Nola Chadron had thought she was making of Major King. Now Nola might have Major King, and all the world beside that her little head might covet. There was no reservation in the surrender that she made of him in her conscience, no regret.

She reproached herself for it in one breath, and glowed with a strange new gladness the next, clasping the great secret fearfully in her breast, in the world-old delusion that she had come into possession of a treasure uniquely and singularly her own. One thing she understood plainly now; she never had loved Major King. What a revolution it was to overturn a life's plans thus in a single night! thought she.

How easily we are astounded by the eruptions in our own affairs, and how disciplined in the end to find that the foundations of the world have withstood the shock!

Chadron himself had not gone out after Macdon-

ald. He had been merry among his guests long after the shots had sounded up the river. Frances believed that the old man had put the matter into the hands of his cowboys and ranch foreman, having no sons, no near male relatives of his own in that place. She did not know how many had gone in pursuit of Macdonald, but several horses were in the party which rode out of the gate. None had returned, she was certain, at the time the party dispersed. The chase must have led them far.

There was no way of knowing what the result of that race had been. If he had escaped, Frances believed that he would let her know in some way; if he had fallen, she knew that the news of his death, important as it would be to Chadron, would fly as if it had wings. There was nothing to do but wait, and in any event hide away that warm sweet thing that had unfolded in beautiful florescence in her soul.

She told herself that he must have escaped, or the pursuers would have returned long before the party from the post left the Chadron house. He had led them a long ride in his daring way, and doubtless was laughing at them now in his own house, among his friends. She wondered what his surroundings were, and what his life was like on that ranch for which he risked it. In the midst of this speculation she fell asleep, and lay wearily in dreamless repose for many hours.

Sleep is a marvelous clarifier of the mind. It is

like the saleratus which the pioneers used to cast into their barrels of Missouri River water, to precipitate the silt and make it clear. Frances rose out of her sleep with readjusted reasoning; in fear, and in doubt.

She was shocked by the surrender that she had made to that unknown man. Perhaps he was nothing more than a thief, as charged, and this story fixing his identification had been only a fabrication. An honest man would have had no necessity for such haste, such wild insistence of his right to love her. It seemed, in the light of due reflection, the rude way of an outlawed hand.

Then there came the soft pleading of something deeper to answer for Alan Macdonald, and to justify his rash deed. He had risked life to see her and set himself right in her eyes, and he had doubled the risk in standing there in the garden, defiantly proud, unbent, and unrepentant, refusing to leave her without some favor to carry away.

There was only a sigh to answer it, after all; only a hope that time would bring her neither shame nor regret for that romantic passage in the dusky garden path. That she had neither shame nor regret in that hour was her sweetest consolation. More, she was comfortable in the security that the secret of that swift interlude was her own. Honest man or thief, Alan Macdonald was not the man to speak of that.

Frances was surprised to find that she had slept

into the middle of the afternoon. Major King had called an hour ago, with inquiries, the maid reported. There! that must be the major's ring again — she hoped she might know it by this time, indeed. In case it was the major, would miss —

Yes; miss would see him. Ask him to wait. The maid's ear was true; it was the major's ring. She came bounding upstairs to report on it, her breath short, her eyes big.

"Oh, miss! I think something must 'a' happened to him, he looks all shook!" she said.

"Nonsense!" said Frances, a little flutter of apprehension, indefinable, cold, passing through her nerves in spite of her bearing and calm face.

Major King had remained standing, waiting her. He was handsome and trim in his uniform, dark-eyed, healthy-skinned, full of the vigor of his young manhood. The major's face was pale, his carriage stiff and severe. He appeared as if something might have happened to him, indeed, or to somebody in whom he was deeply concerned.

Frances knew that her face was a picture of the worriment and straining of her past night, for it was a treacherous mirror of her soul. She smiled as she made a little pause in the reception-room door. Major King bowed, with formal, almost official, dignity. His hand was in the bosom of his coat, and he drew it forth with something white in it as she approached.

"I'm dreadfully indolent to belong to a soldiering

family, Major King," she said, offering her hand in greeting.

"Permit me," said he, placing the folded white thing in her outstretched fingers.

"What is it? Not — it isn't — " she stammered, something deeper than surprise, than foreboding, in her eyes and colorless cheeks.

"Unmistakably yours," he said; "your name is stamped in it."

"It must be," she owned, her spirits sinking low, her breath weak between her lips. "Thank you, Major King."

The glove was soiled with earth-marks; it was wrinkled and drawn, as if it had come back to her through conflict and tragedy. She rolled it deliberately, in a compact little wad, her fingers as cold as her hope for the life of the man who had borne it away. She knew that Major King was waiting for a word; she was conscious of his stern eyes upon her face. But she did not speak. As far as Major King's part in it went, the matter was at an end.

"Miss Landcraft, I am waiting."

Major King spoke with imperious suggestion. She started, and looked toward him quickly, a question in her eyes.

"I sha'n't keep you then," she returned, her words little more than a whisper.

"Don't try to read a misunderstanding into my words," said he, his voice shaking. Then he seemed to break his stiff, controlled pose as if it had been

a coating of ice, and expand into a trembling, white-hot man in a moment. "God's name, girl! Say something, say something! You know where that glove was found?"

"No; and I shall not ask you, Major King."

"But I demand of you to know how it came in that man's possession! Tell me that — tell me!"

He stood before her, very near to her. His hands were shaking, his eyes gleaming with fury.

"I might ask you with as much reason how it came in yours," she told him, resentful of his angry demand.

"A messenger arrived with it an hour ago."

"For you, Major King?"

"For me, certainly."

She had no need to ask him whence the messenger came. She could see the horsemen returning to the ranchhouse by the river in the gray morning light, in the triumph of their successful hunt. Alan Macdonald had fallen. It had been Nola's hand that had dispatched this evidence of what she could but guess to be the disloyalty of Frances to her betrothed. If Nola had hoped to make a case with the major, Frances felt she had succeeded better than she knew.

"Then there is nothing more to be said, Major King," said she, after a little wait.

"There is much more," he insisted. "Tell me that he snatched the glove from you, tell me that you lost it — tell me anything, and I'll believe you — but tell me something!"

"There is nothing to tell you," said she, resentful of the meddling of Nola Chadron, which his own light conduct with her had in a manner justified.

"Then I can only imagine the truth," he told her, bitterly. "But surely you didn't give him the glove, surely you cannot love that wolf of the range, that cattle thief, that murderer!"

"You have no right to ask me that," she said, flashing with resentment.

"I have a right to ask you that, to ask you more; not only to ask, but to demand. And you must answer. You forget that you are my affianced wife."

"But you are not my confessor, for all that."

"God's name!" groaned King, his teeth set, his eyes staring as if he had gone mad. "Will you shame us both? Do you forget you are *my affianced wife?*"

"That is ended—you are free!"

"Frances!" he cried, sharply, as in despair of one sinking, whom he was powerless to save.

"It is at an end between us, Major King. My 'necessity' of explaining everything, or anything, to you is wiped away, your responsibility for my acts relieved. Lift your head, sir. You need not blush before the world for me!"

Sweat was springing on the major's forehead; he drew his breath through open lips.

"I refuse to humor your caprice—you are irresponsible, you don't know what you are doing," he declared. "You are forcing the issue to this point, Frances, I haven't demanded this."

"You have demanded too much. You may go now, Major King."

"It's only the infatuation of a moment. You can't care for a man like that, Frances," he argued, shaken out of his passion by her determined stand.

"This is not a matter for discussion between you and me, sir."

Major King bowed his head as if the rebuke had crushed him. She stood aside to let him pass. When he reached the door she turned to him. He paused, expectantly, hopefully, as if he felt that a reconciliation was dawning.

"If it hadn't been for you they wouldn't have discovered him last night," she charged. "You betrayed him to his enemies. Can you tell me, then — will you tell me — is Alan Macdonald — dead?"

Major King stood, his stern eyes on the glove, unrolled again, now dangling in her hand.

"If he was a gentleman, as you said of him once, then he is dead," said he.

He turned and left her. She did not look after him, but stood with the soiled glove spread in her hands, gazing upon it in sad tenderness.

CHAPTER VI

A BOLD CIVILIAN

COLONEL LANDCRAFT was a slight man, and short of stature for a soldierly figure when out of the saddle. His gray hair was thinning in front, and his sharp querulous face was seamed in frowning pattern about the eyes. His forehead was fashioned on an intention of massiveness out of keeping with his tapering face, which ran out in a disappointing chin, and under the shadow of that projecting brow his cold blue eyes seemed as unfriendly as a winter sky.

Early in his soldiering days the colonel had felt the want of inches and pounds, a shortage which he tried to overcome by carrying himself pulled up stiffly, giving him a strutting effect that had fastened upon him and become inseparable from his mien. This air of superior brusqueness was sharpened by the small fierceness of his visage, in which his large iron-gray mustache branched like horns.

Smallness of stature, disappointment in his ambition for preferment, and a natural narrowness of soul, had turned Colonel Landcraft into a military martinet of the most pronounced character. He was the grandfather of colonels in the service, rank won in the old Indian days. That he was not a brigadier-general was a circumstance puzzling only to himself.

He was a man of small bickerings, exactions, forms. He fussed with civilians as a regular thing when in command of posts within the precincts of civilization, and to serve under him, as officer or man, was a chafing and galling experience.

If ever there was an unpopular man in the service, then that man was Colonel John Hancock Landcraft, direct descendant — he could figure it out as straight as a bayonet — of the heavy-handed signer himself. His years and his empty desires bore heavily on the colonel. The trespass of time he resented; the barrenness of his hope he grieved.

There he was in those Septembral days, galloping along toward the age limit and retirement. Within a few weeks he would be subject to call before the retiring board any day, and there was nothing in his short-remaining time of service to shore up longer the hope of advancement in rank as compensatory honor in his retirement. He was a testy little old man, charged for instant explosion, and it was generally understood by everybody but the colonel himself that the department had sent him off to Fort Shakie to get him out of the way.

On the afternoon of the day following Nola Chadron's ball, when Major King returned to Frances the glove that Alan Macdonald had carried away from the garden, Colonel Landcraft was a passenger on the mail stage from Meander to the post. The colonel had been on official business to the army post at Cheyenne. Instead of telegraphing to his

own post the intelligence of his return, and calling for a proper equipage to meet him at the railroad end, he had chosen to come back in this secret and unexpected way.

That was true to the colonel's manner. Perhaps he hoped to catch somebody overstepping the line of decorum, regulations, forms, either in the conduct of the post's business or his own household. For the colonel was as much a tyrant in one place as the other. So he eliminated himself, wrapped to the bushy eyebrows in his greatcoat, for there was a chilliness in the afternoon, and clouds were driving over the sun.

His austerity silenced the talkative driver, and when the stage reached the hotel the colonel parted from him without a word and clicked away briskly on his military heels — built up to give him stature — to see what he might surprise out of joint at the post.

Perhaps it was a shock to his valuation of his own indispensability to find everything in proper form at the post. The sentry paced before the flagstaff, decorum prevailed. There was not one small particular loose to give him ground for flying at the culpable person and raking him with his blistering fire.

Colonel Landcraft turned into his own house with a countenance somewhat fallen as a consequence of this discovery. It seemed to bear home to him the fact that the United States Army would get along very neatly and placidly without him.

The colonel occupied one wing of his sprawling, commodious, and somewhat impressive house as official headquarters. This room was full of stiff bookcases, letter files, severe chairs. The colonel's desk stood near the fireplace in a strong light, with nothing ever unfinished left upon it. It was one of the colonel's greatest satisfactions in life that he always was ready to snap down the cover of that desk at a moment's notice and march away upon a campaign to the world's end — and his own — leaving everything clear behind him.

A private walk led up to a private door in the colonel's quarters, where a private in uniform, with a rifle on his shoulder, made a formal parade when the colonel was within, and accessible to the military world for the transaction of business. This sentinel was not on duty now, the return of the colonel being unlooked-for, and nobody was the wiser in that household when the master of it let himself into the room with his key.

The day was merging into dusk, or the colonel probably would have been aware that a man was hastening after him along the leaf-strewn walk as he passed up the avenue to his home. He was not many rods behind the colonel, and was gaining on him rapidly, when the crabbed old gentleman closed his office door softly behind him.

The unmilitary visitor — this fact was betrayed by both his gait and his dress — turned sharply in upon the private walk and followed the colonel to his door.

He was turning through the letters and telegrams which had arrived during his absence when the visitor laid hand to the bell.

No sound of ringing followed this application to the thumbscrew arrangement on the door, for the colonel had taken the bell away long ago. But there resulted a clucking, which brought the colonel to the portal frowning and alert, warming in the expectation of having somebody whom he might dress down at last.

"Colonel Landcraft, I beg the favor of a word in private," said the stranger at the door.

The colonel opened the door wider, and peered sharply at the visitor, a frown gathering on his unfriendly face.

"I haven't the honor"—he began stiffly, seeing that it was an inferior civilian, for all civilians, except the president, were inferior to the colonel.

"Macdonald is my name. I am a rancher in this country; you will have heard of me," the visitor replied.

"Nothing to your credit, young man," said the colonel, tartly. "What do you want?"

"A man's chance," said Macdonald, earnestly. "Will you let me explain?"

Colonel Landcraft stood out of the doorway; Macdonald entered.

"I'll make a light," said the colonel, lowering the window-shades before he struck the match. When he had the flame of the student's lamp on top of his

desk regulated to conform to his exactions, the colonel faced about suddenly.

"I am listening, sir."

"At the beginning, sir, I want you to know who I am," said Macdonald, producing papers. "My father, Senator Hampden Macdonald of Maine, now lives in Washington. You have heard of him. I am Alan Macdonald, late of the United States consular service. It is unlikely that you ever heard of me in that connection."

"I never heard of you before I came here," said the colonel, unfavorably, unfolding the credentials which the visitor had placed on his desk, and skimming them with cursory eye. Now he looked up from his reading with a sudden little jerk of the head, and stood at severe attention. "And the purpose of this visit, sir?"

"First, to prove to you that the notorious character given me by the cattlemen of this country is slanderous and unwarranted; secondly, to ask you to give me a man's chance, as I have said, in a matter to which I shall come without loss of words. I am a gentleman, and the son of a gentleman; I do not acknowledge any moral or social superiors in this land."

The colonel drew himself up a notch, and seemed to grow a little at that. He looked hard at the tall, fair-haired, sober-faced man in front of him, as if searching out his points to justify the bold claim upon respectability that he had made. Macdonald

was dressed in almost military precision; the colonel could find no fault with that. His riding-breeches told that they had been cut for no other legs, his coat set to his shoulders with gentlemanly ease. Only his rather greasy sombrero, with its weighty leather band, and the bulging revolvers under his coat seemed out of place in the general trimness of his attire.

"Go on, sir," the colonel said.

"I had the honor of meeting Miss Landcraft last night at the masquerade given by Miss Chadron —"

"How was that, sir? Did you have the effrontery to force yourself into a company which despises you, at the risk of your life and the decorum of the assemblage?"

"I was drawn there," Macdonald spoke slowly, meeting the colonel's cold eye with steady gaze, "by a hope that was miraculously realized. I did risk my life, and I almost lost it. But that is nothing unusual — I risk it every day."

"You saw Miss Landcraft at the ball, danced with her, I suppose, talked with her," nodded the colonel, understandingly. "Macdonald, you are a bold, a foolishly bold, man."

"I saw Miss Landcraft, I danced with her, I talked with her, and I have come to you, sir, after a desperate ride through the night to save my life as the penalty of those few minutes of pleasure, to request the privilege of calling upon Miss Landcraft and paying my court to her. I ask you to give me a man's chance to win her hand."

The audacity of the request almost tied the colonel's sharp old tongue. For a moment he stood with his mouth open, his face red in the gathering storm of his sudden passion.

"Sir!" said he, in amazed, unbelieving voice.

"There are my credentials — they will bear investigation," Macdonald said.

"Damn your credentials, sir! I'll have nothing to do with them, you blackguard, you scoundrel!"

"I ask you to consider —"

"I can consider nothing but the present fact that you are accused of deeds of outlawry and violence, and are an outcast of society, even the crude society of this wild country, sir. No matter who you are or whence you sprung, the evidence in this country is against you. You are a brigand and a thief, sir — this act of barbaric impetuosity in itself condemns you — no civilized man would have the effrontery to force himself into my presence in such a manner and make this insane demand."

"I am exercising a gentleman's prerogative, Colonel Landcraft."

"You are a vulture aspiring to soar among eagles, sir!"

"You have heard only the cattlemen's side of the story, Colonel Landcraft," said Macdonald, with patience and restraint. "You know that every man who attempts to build a fence around his cabin in this country, and strikes a furrow in the ground, is a rustler according to their creed."

"I am aware that there is narrowness, injustice even, on the drovers' side," the colonel admitted, softening a little, it seemed. "But for all that, even if you were an equal, and an honest man, the road to Miss Landcraft's heart is closed to assault, no matter how wild and sudden. She is plighted to another man."

"Sir—"

"It is true; she will be married in the Christmas holidays. Go your way now, Macdonald, and dismiss this romantic dream. You build too high on the slight favor of a thoughtless girl. A dance or two is nothing, sir; a whispered word is less. If you were the broad man of the world that you would have me believe, you have known this. Instead, you come dashing in here like a savage and claim the right to woo her. Preposterous! She is beyond your world, sir. Go back to your wild riding, Macdonald, and try to live an honest man."

Macdonald stood with his head bent, brows gathered in stubborn expression of resistance. Colonel Landcraft could read in his face that there was no surrender, no acknowledgment of defeat, in that wild rider's heart. The old warrior felt a warming of admiration for him, as one brave man feels for another, no matter what differences lie between them. Now Macdonald lifted his face, and there was that deep movement of laughter in his eyes that Frances had found so marvelous on the day of their first meeting.

"Perhaps her heart is untouched, sir, in spite of the barricade that has been raised between it and the world," he said.

The colonel studied him shrewdly a little while before replying.

"Macdonald, you're a strange man, a stubborn man, and a strong one. There is work for a man like you in this life; why are you wasting it here?"

"If I live six months longer the world beyond these mountains will know," was all that Macdonald said, taking up the papers which he had submitted to the colonel, and placing them again in his pocket.

Colonel Landcraft shook his head doubtfully.

"Running off other men's cattle never will do it, Macdonald."

The door of the colonel's room which gave into the hall of the main entrance opened without the formality of announcement. Frances drew back in quick confusion, speaking her apology from behind the door.

"I ask your pardon, father. I heard voices here and wondered who it could be — I didn't know you had come home."

"Your appearance is opportune, Miss Landcraft," her father told her, with no trace of ill-humor. "Come in. Here is this wild Alan Macdonald come bursting in upon us from his hills."

The colonel indicated him with a wave of the hand, and Macdonald bowed, his heart shrinking when he saw how coldly she returned his greeting from her place at the door.

"He has come riding," the colonel continued, "with a demand on me to be allowed to woo you, and carry you off to his cave among the rocks. Show him the door, and add your testimony to my assurance — which seems inadequate to satisfy the impetuous gentleman — that his case is hopeless."

The colonel waved them away with that, and turned again, with his jerky suddenness, to his telegrams and letters. The colonel had not meant for Macdonald to pass out of the door through which he had entered. That was the military portal; the other one, opening into the hall from which Frances came, was the world's door for entering that house. And it was in that direction Colonel Landcraft had waved them when he ordered Frances to take the visitor away.

"This way, Mr. Macdonald, please," said she, politely cold, unfeelingly formal. For all the warmth that he could discover in her voice and eyes, or in her white face, so unaccountably severe and hard, there might never have been a garden with white gravel path, or a hot hasty kiss given in it — and received.

In the hall the gloom of evening was deepened into darkness that made her face indistinct, like the glimmering whiteness of the hydrangea blooms in that past romantic night. She marched straight to the street door and opened it, and he had no strength in his words to lift even a small one up to stay her. He believed that he had taken the man's course and

the way of honor in the matter. That it had not been indorsed by her was evident, he believed.

"There was nothing for me to conceal," said he, as the door opened upon the gray twilight and glooming trees along the street; "I came in a man's way, as I thought —"

"You came in a man's way, Mr. Macdonald, to ask the privilege of attempting to win a woman's hand, when you lack the man's strength or the man's courage to defend even the glove that covers it," she said. Her voice was low; it was accusingly scornful.

Macdonald started. "Then it has come back to you?"

"It has come back to me, through a channel that I would have given the hand that wore it" — she stretched it out as she spoke; it glimmered like a nebulous star in misty skies there in the gloom before his eyes — "to have kept the knowledge from!"

"I lost it," said he, drawing himself up as if to withstand a blow, "and in this hour I can plead no mitigation. A man should have put his life down for it."

"It might have been expected — of a man," said she.

"But I ask you not to borrow trouble over the circumstance of its return to you, Miss Landcraft," he said, cold now in his word, and lofty. "You dropped it on the ballroom floor or in the garden path, and I, the cattle thief, found it and carried it away, to show it as evidence of a shadowy conquest,

maybe, among my wild and lawless kind. Beyond that you know nothing — you lost it, that was all."

In the door he turned.

"Good-bye, Mr. Macdonald," she said.

"If time and events prove so unkind to me that I never come to a vindication in this country," he said, "just go on thinking of me as a thief and a wild rider, and a man of the night. Good-bye, Miss Landcraft."

She closed the door, and stood cooling from her sudden resentment at seeing him there alive when her heart had told her that he must be lying dead in the dust of the river trail. She should not have been so suddenly resentful, she now believed. Perhaps there were mitigating circumstances which he would not stoop to explain unasked. Her heart bounded with the thought; warm blood came spreading in her cheeks.

But Alan Macdonald was gone; misjudged and unjustly condemned, she now believed, remorse assailing her. Now the fault could not be repaired, for he was not the man to come back. But there was much in knowing that she had not been mistaken in the beginning; comfort and pride in the full knowledge that he was a *man!* Only a man would have come, bravely and sincerely, in that manner to her father; only a man would have put his hurt behind him like that and marched away from her, too proud to stoop to the mean expedient of begging her to allow him to explain.

She sighed as she turned back into the room where the colonel sat at his desk, but her cheek was hot, her bosom agitated by an uplifting of pride. The colonel turned, with inquiring impatience, a letter in his hand.

"He is gone," she said.

"Very well," he nodded, shortly.

"I have just come back to tell you, father, that I have broken my engagement with Major King, to—"

"Impossible! nonsense!"

"To save you embarrassment in your future relations with him," she concluded, unshaken.

The colonel was standing now; his face reflecting the anger that boiled in his breast.

"I tell you, miss, you can't break your engagement to Major King! That is out of your power, beyond you, entirely. It rests with me, and with me solely, to terminate any such obligation. I have pledged a soldier's word and a soldier's honor in this matter, miss. It is incumbent on you to see that both are redeemed."

"I'm in a mind to do my own thinking now, father; I'm old enough."

"A woman is never old enough to know her own mind! What's the occasion of this change in the wind? Surely not—"

Colonel Landcraft's brows drew together over his thin nose, making small glaring points of his blue eyes among the gathered wrinkles and bristling hair.

He held his words suspended while he searched her face for justification of his pent arraignment.

"Nonsense!" said he at last, letting his breath go with the word, as if relief had come. "Put the notion out of your head, for you are going to marry Major King."

"I tell you, father, you must adjust yourself to my decision in this matter. I am not going to marry Major King. I have told him so, and it is final."

His own stubbornness, his own fire, was reflected in her as she spoke. But Colonel Landcraft was not to be moved from what he considered his right to dispose of her in a way that he believed would be an honor to the army and a glory to the nation.

"You'll marry Major King, or die a maid!" he declared.

"Very well, father," she returned, in ambiguous concession.

She left him frowning among his papers. In his small, tyrannical way he had settled that case, finally and completely, to his own thinking, as he had disposed of wild-riding Alan Macdonald and his bold, outlandish petition.

CHAPTER VII

THROWING THE SCARE

BANJO GIBSON arrived at Macdonald's place the following day, from Sam Hatcher's ranch across the river, bringing news that three homesteaders on that side had been killed in the past two days. They had been shot from the willow thickets as they worked in their fields or rode along the dim-marked highways. Banjo could not give any further particulars; he did not know the victims' names.

Macdonald understood what it meant, and whose hand was behind the slaying of those home-makers of the wilderness. It was not a new procedure in the cattle barons' land; this scourge had been foreshadowed in that list of names which Frances Landcraft had given him.

The word had gone out to them to be on guard. Now death had begun to leap upon them from the roadside grass. Perhaps his own turn would come tonight or tomorrow. He could not be more watchful than his neighbors had been; no man could close all the doors.

The price of life in that country for such men as himself always had been unceasing vigilance. When a man stood guard over himself day and night he could do no more, and even at that he was almost certain, some time or other, to leave a chink open

through which the waiting blow might fall. After a time one became hardened to this condition of life. The strain of watching fell away from him; it became a part of his daily habit, and a man grew careless about securing the safeguards upon his life by and by.

"Them fellers," said Banjo, feeling that he had lowered himself considerably in carrying the news involving their swift end to Maconald, "got about what was comin' to 'em I reckon, Mac. Why don't a man like you hitch up with Chadron or Hatcher, or one of the good men of this country, and git out from amongst them runts that's nosin' around in the ground for a livin' like a drove of hogs?"

"Every man to his liking, Banjo," Macdonald returned, "and I don't like the company you've named."

They never quarreled over the point, but Banjo never ceased to urge the reformation, such as he honestly believed it to be, upon Macdonald at every visit. The little troubadour felt that he was doing a generous and friendly turn for a fallen man, and squaring his own account with Macdonald in thus laboring for his redemption.

Banjo was under obligation to Macdonald for no smaller matter than his life, the homesteader having rescued him from drowning the past spring when the musician, heading for Chadron's after playing for a dance, had mistaken the river for the road and stubbornly urged his horse into it. On that

occasion Banjo's wits had been mixed with liquor, but his sense of gratitude had been perfectly clear ever since. Macdonald's door was the only one in the nesters' colony that stress or friendship ever had constrained him to enter. Even as it was, with all the big debt of gratitude owing, his intimacy with a man who had opened an irrigation ditch was a thing of which he did not boast abroad.

Banjo made but a night's stop of it with Macdonald. Early in the morning he was in the saddle again, with a dance ahead of him to play for that night at a ranch twenty miles or more away. He lingered a little after shaking hands with his host, trying the violin case as if to see that it was secure, and fidgeting in his saddle, and holding back on the start. Macdonald could see that there was something unsaid in the little man's mind which gave him an uneasiness, like indigestion.

"What is it, Banjo?" he asked, to let it be known that he understood.

"Mac, did you ever hear tell of a feller named Mark Thorn?" Banjo inquired, looking about him with fearful caution, lowering his voice almost to a whisper.

"Yes, I've heard of him."

"Well, he's in this country."

"Are you sure about that, Banjo?" Macdonald's face was troubled; he moved nearer the musician as he made the inquiry, and laid his hand on his arm.

"He's here. He's the feller you've got to watch out

for. He cut acrosst the road yisterday afternoon when I was comin' down here, and when he seen me he stopped, for I used to know him up north and he knew it wasn't no use to try to duck and hide his murderin' face from me. He told me he was ranchin' up in Montany, and he'd come down here to collect some money Chadron owed him on an old bill."

"Pretty slim kind of a story. But he's here to collect money from Chadron, all right, and give him value received. What kind of a looking man is he?"

"He's long and lean, like a rail, with a kind of a bend in him when he walks, and the under lid of his left eye drawed like you'd pulled it down and stuck a tack in it. He's wearin' a cap, and he's kind of whiskered up, like he'd been layin' out some time."

"I'd know him," Macdonald nodded.

"You couldn't miss him in a thousand, Mac. Well, I must be rackin' along."

Banjo scarcely had passed out of sight when three horsemen came galloping to Macdonald's gate. They brought news of a fresh tragedy, and that in the immediate neighborhood. A boy had been shot down that morning while doing chores on a homestead a little way across the river. He was the son of one of the men on the death-list, and these men, the father among them, had come to enlist Macdonald's aid in running down the slayer.

The boy's mother had seen the assassin hastening away among the scant bushes on the slope above the

house. The description that she gave of him left no doubt in Macdonald's mind of his identity. It was Mark Thorn, the cattlemen's contract killer, the homesteaders' scourge.

It was a fruitless search that day, seeking old Mark Thorn among the hills which rose brokenly a few miles back from the river and climbed to the knees of the mountains in ever-mounting surge. A devil's darning-needle in a cornfield would have been traced and cornered as quickly as that slippery thin old killer of men, it seemed.

As if to show his contempt for those who hunted him, and to emphasize his own feeling of security, he slipped down to the edge of the fenced lands and struck down another homesteader that afternoon, leaving him dead at the handles of his plow.

Those homesteaders were men of rare courage and unbending persistency in the ordinary affairs of life, but three days of empty pursuit of this monster left them out of heart. The name of Mark Thorn in itself was sufficient to move a thrill of terror and repulsion. He had left his red mark in many places through the land dominated by the cattle interests of the Northwest, where settlers had attempted to find lodgment. He had come at length to stand for an institution of destruction, rather than an individual, which there was no power strong enough to circumvent, nor force cunning enough to entrap.

There never was a tale of monsters, wolf-men, bloody-muzzled great beasts of dark forests, that

struck deeper fear into the hearts of primitive peasantry than this modern ogre moved in the minds and hearts of those striving settlers in the cattle lands. Mark Thorn was a shadowy, far-reaching thing to them, distorted in their imaginings out of the semblance of a man. He had grown, in the stories founded on facts horrible enough without enlargement, into a fateful destroyer, from whom no man upon whom he had set his mark could escape.

Little wonder, then, that fear for the safety of their wives and children made the faces of these men gray as they rode the sage, combing the hollows and hills for the sight of old Mark Thorn. One by one they began to drop out of the posse, until of the fourteen besides Macdonald who had ridden in the hunt on the second day, only five remained on the evening of the third.

It was no use looking for Mark Thorn, they said, shaking gloomy heads. When he came into a country on a contract to kill, it was like a curse predestined which the power of man could not turn aside. He had the backing of the Drovers' Association, which had an arm as long in that land as the old Persian king's. He would strike there, like the ghost of all the devils in men that ever had lived on their fellows' blood, and slink away as silently as a wolf out of the sheepfold at dawn when his allotted task was done.

Better to go home and guard what was left, they said. All of them were men for a fight, but it was

one thing to stand up to something that a man could see, and quite another to fight blindfolded, and in the dark. Catching Mark Thorn was like trying to ladle moonlight with a sieve. The country wasn't worth it, they were beginning to believe. When Mark Thorn came in, it was like the vultures flying ahead of the last, devastating plague.

The man whose boy had been shot down beside the little grass-roofed barn was the last to leave.

"I'll stick to it for a year, Alan, if you think it's any use," he said.

He was a gaunt man, with sunken cheeks and weary eyes; gray, worn, unwashed, and old; one of the earth's disinherited who believed that he had come into his rood of land at last. Now the driving shadow of his restless fate was on him again. Macdonald could see that it was heavy in his mind to hitch up and stagger on into the west, which was already red with the sunset of his day.

Macdonald was moved by a great compassion for this old man, whose hope had been snatched away from him by the sting of a bullet in the dawn. He laid his hand on the old homesteader's sagging thin shoulder and poured the comfort of a strong man's sympathy into his empty eyes.

"Go on back, Tom, and look after the others," he said. "Do your chores by dark, morning and night, and stick close to cover all day, and watch for him. I'll keep on looking. I started to get that old hyena, and I'll get him. Go on home."

The old man's eyes kindled with admiration. But it died as quickly as it had leaped up, and he shook his long hair with a sigh.

"You can't do nothin' agin him all alone, Alan."

"I think I'll have a better chance alone than in a crowd, Tom. There's no doubt that there were too many of us, crashing through the brush and setting ourselves up against the sky line every time we rode up a hill. I'll tackle him alone. Tell the neighbors to live under cover till they hear I've either got him or he's got me. In case it turns out against me, they can do whatever seems best to them."

CHAPTER VIII

AFOOT AND ALONE

MARK THORN had not killed anybody since shooting the man at the plow. There were five deaths to his credit on that contract, although none of the fallen was on the cattlemen's list of desirables to be removed.

Five days had passed without a tragedy, and the homesteaders were beginning to draw breath in the open again, in the belief that Macdonald must have driven the slayer out of the country. Nothing had been seen or heard of Macdonald since the evening that he parted company with Tom Lassiter, father of the murdered boy.

Macdonald, in the interval, was hard on the old villain's trail. He had picked it up on the first day of his lone-handed hunt, and once he had caught a glimpse of Thorn as he dodged among the red willows on the river, but the sight had been too transitory to put in a shot. It was evident now that Thorn knew that he was being hunted by a single pursuer. More than that, there were indications written in the loose earth where he passed, and in the tangled brushwood where he skulked, that he had stopped running away and had turned to hunt the hunter.

For two days they had been circling in a constantly tightening ring, first one leading the hunt, then the

other. Trained and accustomed as he was to life under those conditions, Thorn had not yet been able to take even a chance shot at his clinging pursuer.

Macdonald was awake to the fact that this balance in his favor could not be maintained long. As it was, he ascribed it more to luck than skill on his part. This wild beast in human semblance must possess all the wild beast's cunning; there would be a rift left open in this straining game of hide and seek which his keen eyes would be sure to see at no distant hour.

The afternoon of that day was worn down to the hock. Macdonald had been creeping and stooping, running, panting, and lying concealed from the first gleam of dawn. Whether by design on the part of Thorn, or merely the blind leading of the hunt, Macdonald could not tell, the contest of wits had brought them within sight of Alamito ranchhouse.

Resting a little while with his back against a ledge which insured him from surprise, Macdonald looked out from the hills over the wide-spanning valley, the farther shore of which was laved in a purple mist as rich as the dye of some oriental weaving. He felt a surge of indignant protest against the greedy injustice of that manorial estate, the fair house glistening in the late sun among the white-limbed cottonwoods. There Saul Chadron sat, like some distended monster, his hands spread upon more than he could honestly use, or his progeny after him for a thousand years, growling and snapping at all whose

steps lagged in passing, or whose weary eyes turned longingly toward those grassy vales.

There had been frost for many nights past; the green of the summerland had merged into a yellow-brown, now gold beneath the slanting sunbeams. A place of friendly beauty and sequestered peace, where a man might come to take up his young dreams, or stagger under the oppression of his years to put them down, and rest. It seemed so, in the light of that failing afternoon.

But the man who sat with his back against the ledge, his ears strained to find the slightest hostile sound, his roaming eyes always coming back with unconscious alertness and frowning investigation to the nearer objects in the broken foreground, had tasted beneath the illusive crust of that land, and the savor was bitter upon his lips. He questioned what good there was to be got out of it, for him or those for whom he had taken up the burden, for many a weary year to come.

The gloom of the situation bore heavily upon him; he felt the uselessness of his fight. He recalled the words of Frances Landcraft: "There must be millions behind the cattlemen." He felt that he never had realized the weight of millions, iniquitous millions, before that hour. They formed a barrier which his shoulder seemed destined never to overturn.

There he was, on that broad heath, afoot and alone, hunting, and hunted by, a slayer of men, one who stalked him as he would a wolf or a lion for the

bounty upon his head. And in the event that a lucky shot should rid the earth of that foul thing, how much would it strengthen his safety, and his neighbors', and fasten their weak hold upon the land?

Little, indeed. Others could be hired out of those uncounted millions of the cattlemen's resources to finish what Mark Thorn had begun. The night raids upon their fields would continue, the slanders against them would spread and grow. Colonel Landcraft believed him to be what malicious report had named him; there was not a doubt of that. And what Frances thought of him since that misadventure of the glove, it was not hard to guess.

But that was not closed between them, he told himself, as he had told himself before, times unnumbered. There was a final word to be said, at the right time and place. The world would turn many times between then and the Christmas holidays, when Frances was to become the bride of another, according to the colonel's plans.

Macdonald was weary from his night vigils and stealthy prowlings by day, and hungry for a hot meal. Since he had taken the trail of Mark Thorn alone he had not kindled a fire. Now the food that he had carried with him was done; he must turn back home for a fresh supply, and a night's rest.

It did not matter much, anyway, he said, feeling the uselessness of his life and strife in that place. It was a big and unfriendly land, a hard and hopeless place for a man who tried to live in defiance of the

established order there. Why not leave it, with its despair and heart-emptiness? The world was full enough of injustices elsewhere if he cared to set his hand to right them.

But a true man did not run away under fire, nor a brave one block out a task and then shudder and slink away, when he stood off and saw the immensity of the thing that he had undertaken. Besides all these considerations, which in themselves formed insuperable reasons against retreat, there had been some big talk into the ear of Frances Landcraft. There was no putting down what he had begun. His dream had taken root there; it would be cruel cowardice to wrench it up.

He got up, the sun striking him on the face, from which the west wind pressed back his hat brim as if to let the daylight see it. The dust of his travels was on it, and the roughness of his new beard, and it was harsh in some of its lines, and severe as an ashlar from the craftsman's tool. But it was a man's face, with honor in it; the sun found no weakness there, no shame concealed under the sophistries and wiles by which men beguile the world.

Macdonald looked away across the valley, past the white ranchhouse, beyond the slow river which came down from the northwest in toilsome curves, whose gray shores and bars were yellow in that sunlight as the sands of famed Pactolus. His breast heaved with the long inspiration which flared his thin nostrils like an Arab's scenting rain; he revived with a new vigor

as the freedom of the plains met his eyes and made them glad. That was his place, his land; its troubles were his to bear, its peace his to glean when it should ripen. It was his inheritance; it was his place of rest. The lure of that country had a deep seat in his heart; he loved it for its perils and its pains. It was like a sweetheart to bind and call him back. A man makes his own Fortunate Isles, as that shaggy old gray poet knew so well.

For a moment Mark Thorn was forgotten as Macdonald repeated, in low voice above his breath:

> Lo! These are the isles of the watery miles
> That God let down from the firmament.
> Lo! Duty and Love, and a true man's trust;
> Your forehead to God and your feet in the dust —

Yes, that was his country; it had taken hold of him with that grip which no man ever has shaken his heart free from, no matter how many seas he has placed between its mystic lure and his back-straining soul. Its fight was his fight, and there was gladness in the thought.

His alertness as he went down the slope, and the grim purpose of his presence in that forbidden place, did not prevent the pleading of a softer cause, and a sweeter. That rare smile woke in his eyes and unbent for a moment the harshness of his lips as he thought of brown hair sweeping back from a white forehead, and a chin lifted imperiously, as became one born to countenance only the exalted in this life.

There was something that made him breathe quicker in the memory of her warm body held a transitory moment in his arms; the recollection of the rose-softness of her lips. All these were waiting in the world that he must win, claimed by another, true. But that was immaterial, he told his heart, which leaped and exulted in the memory of that garden path as if there was no tomorrow, and no such shadow in man's life as doubt.

Of course, there remained the matter of the glove. A man might have been expected to die before yielding it to another, as she had said, speaking out of a hot heart, he knew. There was a more comfortable thought for Alan Macdonald as he went down the long slope with the western sun on his face; not a thought of dying for a glove, but of living to win the hand that it had covered.

Chadron's ranchhouse was several miles to the westward of him, although it appeared nearer by the trickery of that clear light. He cut his course to bring himself into the public highway — a government road, it was — that ran northward up the river, the road along which Chadron's men had pursued him the night of the ball. He meant to strike it some miles to the north of Chadron's homestead, for he was not looking for any more trouble than he was carrying that day.

He proceeded swiftly, but cautiously, watching for his man. But Mark Thorn did not appear to be abroad in that part of the country. Until sundown

Macdonald walked unchallenged, when he struck the highway a short distance south of the point where the trail leading to Fort Shakie branched from it.

Saul Chadron and his daughter Nola came riding out of the Fort Shakie road, their horses in that tireless, swinging gallop which the animals of that rare atmosphere can maintain for hours. As he rode, Chadron swung his quirt in unison with the horse's undulations, from side to side across its neck, like a baton. He sat as stiff and solid in his saddle as a carved image. Nola came on neck and neck with him, on the side of the road nearer Macdonald.

Macdonald was carrying a rifle in addition to his side arms, and he was a dusty grim figure to come upon suddenly afoot in the high road. Chadron pulled in his horse and brought it to a stiff-legged stop when he saw Macdonald, who had stepped to the roadside to let them pass. The old cattleman's high-crowned sombrero was pinched to a peak; the wind of his galloping gait had pressed its broad brim back from his tough old weathered face. His white mustache and little dab of pointed beard seemed whiter against the darkness of passion which mounted to his scowling eyes.

"What in the hell're you up to now?" he demanded, without regard for his companion, who was accustomed, well enough, to his explosions and expletives.

Macdonald gravely lifted his hand to his hat, his eyes meeting Nola's for an instant, Chadron's chal-

lenge unanswered. Nola's face flared at this respectful salutation as if she had been insulted. She jerked her horse back a little, as if she feared that violence would follow the invasion of her caste by this fallen and branded man, her pliant waist weaving in graceful balance with every movement of her beast.

Macdonald lowered his eyes from her blazingly indignant face. Her horse was slewed across the narrow road, and he considered between waiting for them to ride on and striking into the shoulder-high sage which grew thick at the roadside there. He thought that she was very pretty in her fairness of hair and skin, and the lake-clear blueness of her eyes. She was riding astride, as all the women in that country rode, dressed in wide pantaloonish corduroys, with twinkling little silver spurs on her heels.

"What're you prowlin' down here around my place for?" Chadron asked, spurring his horse as he spoke, checking its forward leap with rigid arm, which made a commotion of hoofs and a cloud of dust.

"This is a public highway, and I deny your right to question my motives in it," Macdonald returned, calmly.

"Sneakin' around to see if you can lay hands on a horse, I suppose," Chadron said, leaning a little in towering menace toward the man in the road.

Macdonald felt a hot surge of resentment rise to his eyes, so suddenly and so strongly that it dimmed his sight. He shut his mouth hard on the words

which sprang into it, and held himself in silence until he had command of his anger.

"I'm hunting," said he, meeting Chadron's eye with meaning look.

"On foot, and waitin' for dark!" the cattleman sneered.

"I'm going on foot because the game I'm after sticks close to the ground. There's no need of naming that game to you — you know what it is."

Macdonald spoke with cutting severity. Chadron's dark face reddened under his steady eyes, and again the big rowels of his spurs slashed his horse's sides, making it bound and trample in threatening charge.

"I don't know anything about your damn low business, but I'll tell you this much; if I ever run onto you ag'in down this way I'll do a little huntin' on my own accord."

"That would be squarer, and more to my liking, than hiring somebody else to do it for you, Mr. Chadron. Ride on — I don't want to stand here and quarrel with you."

"I'm goin' to clear you nesters out of there up the river" — Chadron waved his hand in the direction of which he spoke — "and put a stop to your rustlin' before another month rolls around. I've stood your fences up there on my land as long as I'm goin' to!"

"I've never had a chance to tell you before, Mr. Chadron" — Macdonald spoke as respectfully as his deep detestation of the cattleman would allow — "but if you've got any other charge to bring against me

except that of homesteading, bring it in a court. I'm ready to face you on it, any day."

"I carry my court right here with me," said Chadron, patting his revolver.

"I deny its jurisdiction," Macdonald returned, drawing himself up, a flash of defiance in his clear eyes.

Chadron jerked his head in expression of lofty disdain.

"Go on! Git out of my sight!" he ordered.

"The road is open to you," Macdonald replied.

"I'm not goin' to turn my back on you till you're out of sight!"

Chadron bent his great owlish brows in a scowl, laid his hand on his revolver and whirled his horse in the direction that Macdonald was facing.

Macdonald did not answer. He turned from Chadron, something in his act of going that told the cattleman he was above so mean suspicion on his part. Nola shifted her horse to let him pass, her elbows tight at her sides, scorn in her lively eyes.

Again Macdonald's hand went to his hat in respectful salute, and again he saw that flash of anger spread in the young woman's cheeks. Her fury blazed in her eyes as she looked at him a moment, and a dull color mounted in his own face as he beheld her foolish and unjustified pride.

Macdonald would have passed her then, but she spurred her horse upon him with sudden-breaking temper, forcing him to spring back quickly to the

roadside to escape being trampled. Before he could collect himself in his astonishment, she struck him a whistling blow with her long-thonged quirt across the face.

"You dog!" she said, her clenched little white teeth showing in her parted lips.

Macdonald caught the bridle and pushed her horse back to its haunches, and she, in her reckless anger, struck him across the hand in sharp quick blows. Her conduct was comparable to nothing but that of an ill-bred child striking one whose situation, he has been told, is the warrant of his inferiority.

The struggle was over in a few seconds, and Macdonald stood free of the little fury, a red welt across his cheek, the back of his hand cut until the blood oozed through the skin in heavy black drops. Chadron had not moved a hand to interfere on either side. Only now that the foolish display of Nola's temper was done he rocked in his saddle and shook the empty landscape with his loud, coarse laugh.

He patted his daughter on the shoulder, like a hunter rewarding a dog. Macdonald walked away from them, the only humiliation that he felt for the incident being that which he suffered for her sake.

It was not so much that a woman had debased herself to the level of a savage, although that hurt him, too, but that her blows had been the expression of the contempt in which the lords of that country held him and his kind. Bullets did not matter so much, for a man could give them back as hot as they

came. But there was no answer, as he could see it in that depressing hour, for such a feudal assertion of superiority as this.

It was to the work of breaking the hold of this hard-handed aristocracy which had risen from the grass roots in the day of its arrogant prosperity — a prosperity founded on usurpation of the rights of the weak, and upheld by murder — that he had set his soul. The need of hastening the reformation never had seemed greater to him than on that day, or more hopeless, he admitted in his heart.

For hour by hour the work ahead of him appeared to grow greater. Little could be expected, judging by the experiences of the past few days, from those who suffered most. The day of extremest pressure in their poor affairs was being hastened by the cattlemen, as Chadron's threat had foretold. Would they when the time came to fight do so, or harness their lean teams and drive on into the west? That was the big question upon which the success or the failure of his work depended.

As he had come down from the hillside out of the sunshine and peace to meet shadow and violence, so his high spirits, hopes, and intentions seemed this bitter hour steeped in sudden gloom. In more ways than one that evening on the white river road, Alan Macdonald felt that he was afoot and alone.

CHAPTER IX

BUSINESS, NOT COMPANY

SAUL CHADRON was at breakfast next morning when Maggie the cook appeared in the dining-room and announced a visitor for the señor boss. Maggie's eyes were bulging, and she did a great deal of pantomime with her shapely shoulders to express her combined fright, disgust, and indignation.

Chadron looked up from his ham and eggs, with a considerable portion of the eggs on the blade of his knife, handle-down in one fist, his fork standing like a lightning rod in the other, and asked her who the man was and what he wanted at that hour of the day. Chadron was eating by lamplight, and alone, according to his thrifty custom of slipping up on the day before it was awake, as if in the hope of surprising it at a vast disadvantage to itself, after his way of handling men and things.

"*Es un extranjero*," replied Maggie, forgetting her English in her excitement.

"Talk white man, you old sow!" Chadron growled.

"He ees a es-trenger, I do not knowed to heem."

"Tell him to go to the barn and wait, I'll be out there in a minute."

"He will not a-goed. I told to heem — whee!" Maggie clamped her hands to her back as if some-

body had caught her in a ticklish spot, as she squealed, and jumped into the room where the grand duke of the cattlemen's nobility was taking his refreshment.

Chadron had returned to his meal after ordering her to send his visitor to the barn. He was swabbing his knife in the fold of a pancake when Maggie made that frightful, shivering exclamation and jumped aside out of the door. Now he looked up to reprove her, and met the smoky eyes of Mark Thorn peering in from the kitchen.

"What're you doin' around here, you old — come in — shut that door! Git him some breakfast," he ordered, turning to Maggie.

Maggie hung back a moment, until Thorn had come into the room, then she shot into the kitchen like a cat through a fence, and slammed the door behind her.

"What in the hell do you mean by comin' around here?" Chadron demanded angrily. "Didn't I tell you never to come here? you blink-eyed old snagshin!"

"You told me," Thorn admitted, putting his rifle down across a chair, drawing another to the table, and seating himself in readiness for the coming meal.

"Then what'd you sneak — "

"News," said Thorn, in his brief way.

"Which news?" Chadron brightened hopefully, his implements, clamped in his hairy fists, inviting the first bolt from the heavens.

"I got him last night."

"You got—*him?*" Chadron lifted himself from his chair on his bent legs in the excitement of the news.

"And I'm through with this job. I've come to cash in, and quit."

"The hell you say!"

"I'm gittin' too old for this kind of work. That feller chased me around till my tongue was hangin' out so fur I stepped on it. I tell you he was—"

"How did you do it?"

Thorn looked at him with a scowl. "Well, I never used a club on a man yit," he said.

"Where did it happen at?"

"Up there at his place. He'd been chasin' me for two days, and when he went back—after grub, I reckon—I doubled on him. Just as he went in the door I got him. I left him with his damn feet stickin' out like a shoemaker's sign."

"How fur was you off from him, Mark?"

"Fifty yards, more 'r less."

"Did you go over to him to see if he was finished, or just creased?"

"I never creased a man in my life!" Thorn was indignant over the imputation.

Chadron shook his head, in doubt, in discredit, in gloomy disbelief.

"If you didn't go up to him and turn him over and look at the whites of his eyes, you ain't sure," he protested. "That man's as slippery as wet leather

—he's fooled more than one that thought they had him, and I'll bet you two bits he's fooled you."

"Go and see, and settle it yourself, then," Thorn proposed, in surly humor.

Chadron had suspended his breakfast, as if the news had come between him and his appetite. He sat in a study, his big hand curved round his cup, his gaze on the cloth. At that juncture Maggie came in with a platter of eggs and ham, which she put down before Mark Thorn skittishly, ready to jump at the slightest hostile start. Thorn began to eat, as calmly as if there was not a stain on his crippled soul.

Unlike the meal of canned oysters which he had consumed as Chadron's guest not many days before, Thorn was not welcomed to this by friendly words and urging to take off the limit. Chadron sat watching him, in divided attention and with dark face, as if he turned troubles over in his mind.

Thorn cleaned the platter in front of him, and looked round hungrily, like a cat that has half-satisfied its stomach on a stolen bird. He said nothing, only he reached his foul hand across the table and took up the dish containing the remnant of Chadron's breakfast. This he soon cleared up, when he rasped the back of his hand across his harsh mustache, like a vulture preening its filthy plumage, and leaned back with a full-stomached sigh.

"He makes six," said he, looking hard at Chadron.

"Huh!" Chadron grunted, noncommittally.

"I want the money, down on the nail, a thousand for the job. I'm through."

"I'll have to look into it. I ain't payin' for anything sight 'nseen," Chadron told him, starting out of his speculative wanderings.

"Money down, on the nail," repeated Thorn, as if he had not heard. His old cap was hovering over his long hair, its flaps down like the wings of a brooding hen. There were clinging bits of broken sage on it, and burrs, which it had gathered in his skulking through the brush.

"I'll send a man up the river right away, and find out about this last one," Chadron told him, nodding slowly. "If you've got Macdonald—"

"If hell's got fire in it!"

"If you've got him, I'll put something to the figure agreed on between you and me. The other fellers you've knocked over don't count."

"I'll hang around—"

"Not here! You'll not hang around here, I tell you!" Chadron cut him off harshly, fairly bristling. "Snake along out of here, and don't let anybody see you. I'll meet you at the hotel in the morning."

"Gittin' peticlar of your company, ain't you?" sneered Thorn.

"You're not company—you're business," Chadron told him, with stern and reproving eyes.

Chadron found Mark Thorn smoking into the chimney in the hotel office next morning, apparently

as if he had not moved from that spot since their first meeting on that peculiar business. The old man-killer did not turn his head as Chadron entered the room with a show of caution and suspicion in his movements, and closed the door after him.

He crossed over to the fire and stood near Thorn, who was slouching low in his chair, his long legs stretched straight, his heels crossed before the low ashy fire that smoldered in the chimney. For a little while Chadron stood looking down on his hired scourge, a knitting of displeasure in his face, as if he waited for him to break the silence. Thorn continued his dark reverie undisturbed, it seemed, his pipestem between his fingers.

"Yes, it was his damn hired hand!" said Chadron, with profound disgust.

"That's what I heard you say," acknowledged Thorn, not moving his head.

"You knew it all the time; you was tryin' to work me for the money, so you could light out!"

"I didn't even know he had a hired hand!" Thorn drew in his legs, straightened his back, and came with considerable spirit to the defense of his evil intent.

"Well, he ain't got none now, but *he's* alive and kickin'. You've bungled on this job worse than an old woman. I didn't fetch you in here to clean out hired hands and kids; we can shake a blanket and scare that kind out of the country!"

"Well, put him in at fifty then, if he was only a hired hand," said Thorn, willing to oblige.

"When you go ahead and do what you agreed to, then we'll talk money, and not a red till then."

Thorn got up, unlimbering slowly, and laid the pipe on the mantel-shelf. He seemed unmoved, indifferent; apathetic as a toothless old lion. After a little silence he shook his head.

"I'm done, I tell you," he said querulously, as if raising the question crossed him. "Pay me for that many, and call it square."

"Bring in Macdonald," Chadron demanded in firm tones.

"I ain't a-goin' to touch him! If I keep on after that man he'll git *me*—it's on the cards, I can see it in the dark."

"Yes, you've lost your nerve, you old wildcat!" There was a taunt in Chadron's voice, a sneer.

Thorn turned on him, a savage, smothered noise in his throat.

"You can say that because you owe me money, but you know it's a damn lie! If you didn't owe me money, I'd make you swaller it with hot lead!"

"You're talkin' a little too free for a man of your trade, Mark." While Chadron's tone was tolerant, even friendly, there was an undercurrent of warning, even threat, in his words.

"You're the feller that's lettin' his gab outrun his gumption. How many does that make for me, talkin' about nerve, how many? Do you know?"

"I don't care how many, it lacks one of bein' enough to suit me."

"Twenty-eight, and I've got 'em down in m' book and I can prove it!"

"Make it twenty-nine, and then quit if you want to."

"Maybe I will." Thorn leaned forward a little, a glitter in his smoky eyes.

Chadron fell back, his face growing pale. His hand was on his weapon, his eyes noting narrowly every move Thorn made.

"If you ever sling a gun on me, you old devil, it'll be—"

"I ain't a-goin' to sling no gun on you as long as you owe me money. I ain't a-goin' to cut the bottom out of m' own money-poke, Chad; you don't need to swivel up in your hide, you ain't marked for twenty-nine."

"Well, don't throw out any more hints like that; I don't like that kind of a joke."

"No, I wouldn't touch a hair of your head," Thorn ran on, following a vein which seemed to amuse him, for he smiled, a horrible, face-drawing contortion of a smile, "for if you and me ever had a fallin' out over money I might git so hard up I couldn't travel, and one of them sheriff fellers might slip up on me."

"What's all this fool gab got to do with business?" Chadron was impatient; he looked at his watch.

"Well, I'd be purty sure to make a speech from the gallers—I always intended to—and lay everything open that ever took place between me and you

and the rest of them big fellers. There's a newspaper feller in Cheyenne that wants to make a book out of m' life, with m' pict're in the inside of the lid, to be sold when I'm dead. I could git money for tellin' that feller what I know."

"Go on and tell him then," — Chadron spoke with a dare in his words, and derision — "that'll be easy money, and it won't call for any nerve. But you don't need to be plannin' any speech from the gallus — you'll never go that fur if you try to double-cross me!"

"I ain't aimin' to double-cross no man, but you can call it that if it suits you. You can call it whatever you purty damn well care to — I'm done!"

Chadron made no reply to that. He was pulling on his great gloves, frowning savagely, as if he meant to close the matter with what he had said, and go.

"Do I git any money, or don't I?" Thorn asked, sharply.

"When you bring in that wolf's tail."

"I ain't a-goin' to touch that feller, I tell you, Chad. That man means bad luck to me — I can read it in the cards."

"Maybe you call that kind of skulkin' livin' up to your big name?" Chadron spoke in derision, playing on the vanity which he knew to be as much a part of that old murderer's life as the blood of his merciless heart.

"I've got glory enough," said Thorn, satisfaction in his voice; "what I want right now's money."

"Earn it before you collect it."

"Twenty-eight 'd fill a purty fair book, countin' in what I could tell about the men I've had dealin's with," Thorn reflected, as to himself, leaning against the mantel, frowning down at the floor with bent head.

"Talk till you're empty, you old fool, and who'll believe you? Huh! you couldn't git yourself hung if you was to try!" Chadron's dark face was blacker for the spreading flood of resentful blood; he pointed with his heavy quirt at Thorn, as if to impress him with a sense of the smallness of his wickedness, which men would not credit against the cattlemen's word, even if he should publish it abroad. "You'll never walk onto the scaffold, no matter how hard you try — there'll be somebody around to head you off and give you a shorter cut than that, I'm here to tell you!"

"Huh!" said Thorn, still keeping his thoughtful pose.

Man-killing is a trade that reacts differently on those who follow it, according to their depth and nature. It makes black devils of some who were once civil, smiling, wholesome men, whether the mischance of life-taking has fallen to them in their duty to society or in outlawed deeds. It plunges some into dark taciturnity and brooding coldness, as if they had eaten of some root which blunted them to all common relish of life.

There are others of whom the bloody trade makes

gabbling fools, light-headed, wild-eyed wasters of words, full of the importance of their mind-wrecking deeds. Like the savage whose reputation mounts with each wet scalp, each fresh head, these kill out of depravity, glorying in the growing score. To this class Mark Thorn belonged.

There was but one side left to that depraved man's mind; his bloody, base life had smothered the rest under the growing heap of his horrible deeds. Thorn had killed twenty-eight human beings for hire, of whom he had tally, but there was one to be included of whom he had not taken count — himself.

As he stood here against the chimney-shelf he was only the outside husk of a man. His soul had been judged already, and burned out of him by the unholy passion which he had indulged. He was as simple in his garrulous chatter of glory and distinction as a half-fool. His warped mind ran only on the spectacular end that he had planned for himself, and the speech from the gallows that was to be the black, damning seal at the end of his atrocious life's record.

Thorn looked up from his study; he shook his head decisively.

"I ain't a-goin' to go back over there in your country and give you a chance at me. If you git me, you'll have to git me here. I ain't a-goin' to sling a gun down on nobody for the money that's in it, I tell you. I'm through; I'm out of the game; my craw's full. It's a bad sign when a man wastes a bullet on a hired hand, takin' him for the boss, and

I ain't a-goin' to run no more resks on that feller. When my day for glory comes I'll step out on the gallers and say m' piece, and they'll be some big fellers in this country huntin' the tall grass about that time, I guess."

Chadron had taken up his quirt from the little round table where the hotel register lay. He turned now toward the outer door, as if in earnest about going his way and leaving Mark Thorn to follow his own path, no matter to what consequences it might lead.

"If you're square enough to settle up with me for this job," said Thorn, "and pay me five hundred for what I've done, I'll leave your name out when I come to make that little speech."

Chadron turned on him with a sneer. "You seem to have your hangin' all cut and dried, but you'll never go ten miles outside of this reservation if you don't turn around and put that job through. You'll never hang — you ain't cut out in the hangin' style."

"I tell you I will!" protested Thorn hotly. "I can see it in the cards."

"Well, you'd better shuffle 'em ag'in."

"I know what kind of a day it's goin' to be, and I know just adzackly how I'll look when I hold up m' hands for them fellers to keep still. Shucks! you can't tell me; I've seen that day a thousand times. It'll be early in the mornin', and the sun bright — "

The door leading to the dining-room opened, and Thorn left his description of that great and final day

in his career hanging like a broken bridge. He turned to see who it was, squinting his old eyes up sharply, and in watching the stranger he failed to see the whiteness that came over Chadron's face like a rushing cloud.

"Grab your gun!" Chadron whispered.

"Just let it stay where it is, Thorn," advised the stranger, his quick hand on his own weapon before Thorn could grasp what it was all about, believing, as he did, in the safety of the reservation's neutral ground. "Macdonald is my name; I've been looking for you." The stranger came on as he spoke.

He was but a few feet away from Thorn, and the old man-killer had his revolvers buckled around him in their accustomed place, while his death-spreading rifle stood near his hand, leaning its muzzle against the chimney-jamb. Thorn seemed to be measuring all the chances which he had left to him in that bold surprise, and to conclude in the same second that they were not worth taking.

Macdonald had not drawn his revolver. His hand was on the butt of it, and his eye held Thorn with a challenge that the old slayer was in no mind to accept.

Thorn was not a close-fighting man. He never had killed one of his kind in a face-to-face battle in all his bloody days. At the bottom he was a coward, as his skulking deeds attested, and in that moment he knew that he stood before his master. Slowly he lifted his long arms above his head, without a word, and stood in the posture of complete surrender.

Nearer the outer door stood Chadron, to whom Macdonald seemed to give little attention, as if not counting him in the game. The big cattleman was "white to the gills," as his kind expressed that state. Macdonald unbuckled Thorn's belt and hung his revolvers over his arm.

"I knowed you'd git me, Macdonald," the old scoundrel said.

Macdonald, haggard and dusty, and grim as the last day that old Mark Thorn had pictured for himself, pushed his prisoner away from the chimney, out of reach of the rifle, and indicated that he was to march for the open door, through which the tables in the dining-room could be seen. At Macdonald's coming Chadron had thrown his hand to his revolver, where he still held it, as if undecided how far to go.

"Keep your gun where it is, Chadron," Macdonald advised. "This isn't my day for you. Clear out of here — quick!"

Chadron backed toward the front door, his hand still dubiously on his revolver. Still suspicious, his face as white as it would have been in death, he reached back with his free hand to open the door.

"I told you he'd git me," nodded Thorn, with something near to exultation in the vindication of his reading of the cards. "I give you a chance — no man's money ain't a-goin' to shut my mouth now!"

"I'll shut it, damn you!" Chadron's voice was dry-sounding and far up in his throat. He drew his revolver with a quick jerk that seemed nothing more

than a slight movement of the shoulder. Quick as he was — and few in the cattlemen's baronies were ahead of him there — Macdonald was quicker. The muzzle of Chadron's pistol was still in the leather when Macdonald's weapon was leveled at his eyes.

"Drop that gun!"

A moment Chadron's arm hung stiffly in that half-finished movement, while his eyes gave defiance. He had not bent before any man in many a year of growing power. But there was no other way; it was either bend or break, and the break would be beyond repair.

Chadron's fingers were damp with sudden sweat as he unclasped them from the pistol-butt and let the weapon fall; sweat was on his forehead, and a heaviness on his chest as if a man sat on him. He felt backwards through the open door with one foot, like an old man distrustful of his limbs, and steadied himself with his shoulder against the jamb, for there was a trembling in his knees. He knew that he had saved himself from the drop into eternal inconsequence by the shading of a second, for there was death in dusty Alan Macdonald's face. The escape left Chadron shaken, like a man who has held himself away from death by his finger-ends at the lip of a ledge.

"I knowed you'd git me, Macdonald," Thorn repeated. "You don't need no handcuffs nor nothin' for me. I'll go along with you as gentle as a fish."

Macdonald indicated that Thorn might lower his

arms, having taken possession of the rifle. "Have you got a horse?" he asked.

Thorn said that he had one in the hotel stable. "But don't you try to take me too fur, Macdonald," he advised. "Chadron he'll ride a streak to git his men together and try to take me away from you — I could see it in his eye when he went out of that door."

Macdonald knew that Thorn had read Chadron's intentions right. He nodded, to let him know that he understood the cattleman's motives.

"Well, don't you run me off to no private rope party, neither, Macdonald, for I can tell you things that many a man 'd pay me big money to keep my mouth shut on."

"You'll have a chance, Thorn."

"But I want it done in the right way, so's I'll git the credit and the fame."

Macdonald was surprised to find this man, whose infamous career had branded him as the arch-monster of modern times, so vain and garrulous. He could account for it by no other hypothesis than that much killing had indurated the warped mind of the slayer until the taking of a human life was to him a commonplace. He was not capable of remorse, any more than he had been disposed to pity. He was not a man, only the blighted and cursed husk of a man, indeed, but doubly dangerous for his irresponsibility, for his atrophied small understanding.

Twenty miles lay between the prisoner and the doubtful security of the jail at Meander, and most

of the distance was through the grazing lands within Chadron's bounds. On the other hand, it was not more than twelve miles to his ranch on the river. He believed that he could reach it before Chadron could raise men to stop him and take the prisoner away.

Once home with Thorn, he could raise a posse to guard him until the sheriff could be summoned. Even then there was no certainty that the prisoner ever would see the inside of the Meander jail, for the sheriff of that county was nothing more than one of Chadron's cowboys, elevated to office to serve the unrighteous desires of the men who had put him there.

But Macdonald was determined that there should be no private rope party for Thorn, neither at the hands of the prisoner's employers nor at those of the outraged settlers. Thorn must be brought to trial publicly, and the story of his employment, which he appeared ready enough to tell for the "glory" in it, must be told in a manner that would establish its value.

The cruelly inhuman tale of his contracts and killings, his engagements and rewards, must be sown by the newspapers far and wide. Out of this dark phase of their oppression their deliverance must rise.

CHAPTER X

"HELL'S A-GOIN' TO POP"

CHANCE DALTON, foreman of Alamito Ranch, was in charge of the expedition that rode late that afternoon against Macdonald's homestead to liberate Mark Thorn, and close his mouth in the cattlemen's effective way upon the bloody secrets which he might in vainglorious boast reveal. Chadron had promised rewards for the successful outcome of the venture, and Chance Dalton rode with his three picked men in a sportsman's heat.

He was going out on a hunt for game such as he had run down more than once before in his many years under Chadron's hand. It was better sport than running down wolves or mountain lions, for there was the superior intelligence of the game to be considered. No man knew what turn the ingenuity of desperation might give the human mind. The hunted might go out in one last splendid blaze of courage, or he might cringe and beg, with white face and rolling eyes. In the case of Macdonald, Dalton anticipated something unusual. He had tasted that unaccountable homesteader's spirit in the past.

Dalton was a wiry, tough man who rode with his elbows out, like an Indian. His face was scarred by old knife-wounds, making it hard for him to shave, in consequence of which he allowed his red beard

to grow to inch-length, where he kept it in subjugation with shears. The gutters of his scars were seen through it, and the ends of them ran up, on both cheeks, to his eyes. A knife had gone across one of these, missing the bright little pupil in its bony cave, but slashing the eyebrow and leaving him leering on that side.

The men who came behind him were cowboys from the Texas Panhandle, lean and tough as the dried beef of their native plains. It was the most formidable force, not in numbers, but in proficiency, that ever had proceeded against Macdonald, and the most determined.

Chadron himself had bent to the small office of spy to learn Macdonald's intention in reference to his prisoner. From a sheltered thicket in the foothills the cattleman had watched the homesteader through his field glasses, making certain that he was returning Thorn to the scene of his latest crimes, instead of risking the long road to the Meander jail.

Chadron knew that Macdonald would defend the prisoner's life with his own, even against his neighbors. Macdonald would be as eager to have Thorn tell the story of his transactions with the Drovers' Association as they would be to have it shut off. The realization of this threw Chadron into a state which he described to himself as the "fantods." Another, with a more extensive and less picturesque vocabulary, would have said that the president of the Drovers' Association was in a condition of panic.

So he had despatched his men on this silencing errand, and now, as the sun was dipping over the hills, all red with the presage of a frosty night, Chance Dalton and his men came riding in sight of Macdonald's little nest of buildings fronting the road by the river.

Macdonald had secured his prisoner with ropes, for there was no compartment in his little house, built of boards from the mountain sawmill, strong enough to confine a man, much less a slippery one like Mark Thorn. The slayer had lapsed into his native taciturnity shortly after beginning the trip from the reservation to Macdonald's homestead, and now he lay on the floor trussed up like a hog for market, looking blackly at Macdonald. Macdonald was considering the night ride to Meander with his prisoner that he had planned, with the intention of proceeding from there to Cheyenne and lodging him in jail. He believed there might be a better chance of holding him for trial there, and some slight hope of justice.

A hail from the gate startled Macdonald. It was the custom of the homesteaders in that country, carried with them from the hills of Missouri and Arkansas, to sit in their saddles at a neighbor's gate and call him to the door with a long "hello-o-oh!" It was the password of friendship in that raw land; a cowboy never had been known to stoop to its use. Cowboys rode up to a homesteader's door when they had anything to say to him, and hammered on it with their guns.

Macdonald went to the door and opened it unhesitatingly. The horseman at the gate was a stranger to him. He wore a little derby hat, such as the cowpunchers despised, and the trappings of his horse proclaimed him as a newcomer to that country. He inquired loudly of the road to Fort Shakie, and Macdonald shouted back the necessary directions, moving a step away from his open door.

The stranger put his hand to his ear and leaned over.

"Which?" said he.

At that sound of that distinctly-cowboy vernacular, Macdonald sprang back to regain the shelter of his walls, sensing too late the trap that the cowboy's unguarded word had betrayed. Chance Dalton at one corner of the rude bungalow, his next best man at the other, had been waiting for the decoy at the gate to draw Macdonald away from his door. Now, as the homesteader leaped back in sudden alarm, they closed in on him with their revolvers drawn.

There was the sound of a third man trying the back door at the same time, and the disguised cowboy at the gate slung his weapon out and sent a wild shot into the lintel above Macdonald's head. The two of them on the ground had him at a disadvantage which it would have been fatal to dispute, and Macdonald, valuing a future chance more than a present hopeless struggle, flung his hands out in a gesture of emptiness and surrender.

"Put 'em up — high!" Dalton ordered.

Dalton watched him keenly as the three in that picture before the door stood keyed to such tension as the human intelligence seldom is called upon to withstand. Macdonald stood with one foot on the low threshold, the door swinging half open at his back. He was bareheaded, his rough, fair hair in wisps on temples and forehead. Dalton's teeth were showing between his bearded lips, and his quick eyes were scowling, but he held his companion back with a command of his free hand.

Macdonald lifted his hands slowly, holding them little above a level with his shoulders.

"Give up your prisoner, Macdonald, and we'll deal square with you," Dalton said.

"Go in and take him," offered Macdonald, stepping aside out of the door.

"Go ahead of us, and put 'em up higher!" Dalton made a little expressive flourish with his gun, evidently distrustful of the homesteader's quick hand, even at his present disadvantage.

The man at the back door was using the ax from Macdonald's wood pile, as the sound of splintering timber told. Between three fires, Macdonald felt his chance stretching to the breaking point, for he had no faith at all in Chance Dalton's word. They had come to get him, and it looked now as if they had won.

When Macdonald entered the house he saw Thorn sitting in the middle of the floor, where he had rolled

and struggled in his efforts to see what was taking place outside.

"You've played hell now, ain't you? lettin' 'em git the drop on you that way!" he said to Macdonald, angrily. "They'll swing—"

"Hand over that gun, Macdonald," Dalton demanded. They were standing near him, one on either hand, both leveling their guns at his head. Macdonald could see the one at the back door of his little two-roomed bungalow through the hole that he had chopped.

"I don't hand my gun to any man; if you want it, come and take it," Macdonald said, feeling that the end was rushing upon him, and wondering what it would be. A bullet was better than a rope, which Chadron had publicly boasted he had laid up for him. There was a long chance if Dalton reached for that gun—a long and desperate chance.

The man at the back door was shouting something, his gun thrust through the hole. Dalton made a cross-reach with his left hand for Macdonald's revolver. On the other side the cowboy was watching his comrade's gun pointing through the kitchen door; Macdonald could see the whites of his eyes as he turned them.

"Don't shoot in here! we've got 'em," he called.

His shifted eye told Macdonald that he was trusting to Dalton, and Dalton at that moment was leaning forward with a strain, cautiously, his hand near Macdonald's holster.

Macdonald brought his lifted arms down, like a swimmer making a mighty stroke, with all the steam behind them that he could raise. His back-handed blow struck the cowboy in the face; Macdonald felt the flame of his shot as it spurted past his forehead. The other arm fell short of the nimbler and more watchful Dalton, but the duck that he made to escape it broke the drop that he had held over Macdonald.

Macdonald's hand flashed up with his own gun. He drove a disabling shot through Dalton's wrist as the ranch foreman was coming up to fire, and kicked the gun that he dropped out of reach of his other hand. The cowboy who had caught Macdonald's desperate blow had staggered back against the foot of the bed and fallen. Now he had regained himself, and was crouching behind the bed, trying to cover himself, and from there as he shrank down he fired. The next flash he sprawled forward with hands outstretched across the blanket, as if he had fallen on his knees to pray.

Macdonald caught Dalton by the shirt collar as he went scrambling on his knees after the revolver. Dalton was splashing blood from his shattered wrist over the room, but he was senseless to pain and blind to danger. He sprang at Macdonald, cursing and striking.

"Keep off, Dalton! I don't want to kill you, man!" Macdonald warned.

Careless of his life Dalton fought, and as they struggled Mark Thorn undoubled himself from his

hunched position on the floor and snatched Dalton's revolver in his bound hands from the floor. His long legs free of his binding ropes, Thorn sprang for the door. He reached it at the moment that the man in the disguise of a homesteader pushed it open.

Macdonald did not see what took place there, for it was over by the time he had struck Dalton into a limp quiet heap at his feet by a blow with his revolver across the eyes. But there had been a shot at the door, and Macdonald had heard the man from the back come running around the side of the house. There were more shots, but all done before Macdonald could leap to the door.

There, through the smoke of many quick shots that drifted into the open door, he saw the two cowboys fallen with outflung arms. In the road a few rods distant Mark Thorn was mounting one of Chadron's horses. The old outlaw flung himself flat along the horse's neck, and presented little of his vital parts as a target. As he galloped away Macdonald fired, but apparently did not hit. In a moment Thorn rode down the river-bank and out of sight.

Macdonald stood a little while in the middle of the disordered room after re-entering the house, a feeling of great silence about him, and a numbness in his ears and over his senses. It was a sensation such as he had experienced once after standing for hours under the spell of Niagara. Something seemed to have been silenced in the world.

He was troubled over the outcome of that treacherous assault. He felt that the shadow of the resultant tragedy was already stretching away from there like the penumbra of an eclipse which must soon engulf those homesteads on the river, and exact a terrible, blasting toll.

Dalton was huddled there, his life wasting through the wound in his wrist, blood on his face from the blow that had laid him still. The dead man across the bed remained as he had fallen, his arms stretched out in empty supplication. There was a pathos in the fellow's pose that touched Macdonald with a pity which he knew to be undeserved. He had not meant to take his life away in that hasty shot, but since it had happened so, he knew that it had been his own deliverance.

Macdonald stripped the garment back and looked at Dalton's hurt. There would be another one to take toll for in the cattlemen's list unless the drain of blood could be checked at once. Dalton moved, opening his eyes.

It seemed unlikely that Dalton ever would sling a gun with that member again, if he should be so lucky, indeed, as to come through with his life. The bone was shattered, the hand hung limp, like a broken wing. Dalton sat up, yielding his arm to his enemy's ministrations, as silent and ungracious as a dog. In a little while Macdonald had done all that he could do, and with a hand under the hollow of Dalton's arm he lifted him to his feet.

"Can you ride?" he asked. Dalton did not reply. He looked at the figure on the bed, and stood turning his eyes around the room in the manner of one stunned, and completely confounded by the failure of a scheme counted infallible.

"You made a botch of this job, Dalton," Macdonald said. "The rest of your crowd's outside where Thorn dropped them—he snatched your gun from the floor and killed both of them."

Dalton went weakly to the door, where he stood a moment, steadying himself with a hand on the jamb. Macdonald eased him from there to the gate, and brought the horses which the gang had hidden among the willows.

"Tell Chadron to send a wagon up here after these dead men," Macdonald said, leading a horse to the gate.

He helped the still silent Dalton into the saddle, where he sat weakly. The man seemed to be debating something to say to this unaccountably fortunate nester, who came untouched through all their attempts upon his life. But whatever it was that he cogitated he kept to himself, only turning his eyes back toward the house, where his two men lay on the ground. The face of one was turned upward. In the draining light of the spent day it looked as white as innocence.

As Dalton drew his eyes away from the fearful evidence of his plan's miscarriage, the sound of hard riding came from the direction of the settlement up

the river. Macdonald listened a moment as the sound grew.

"That will be no friend of yours, Dalton. Get out of this!"

He cut Dalton's horse a sharp blow. The beast bounded away with a start that almost unseated its dizzy rider; the two free animals galloped after it. Chance Dalton was on his way to Chadron with his burden of disgrace and disastrous news. It seemed a question to Macdonald, as he watched him weaving in the saddle as the gloom closed around him and shut him from sight, whether he ever would reach the ranchhouse to recount his story, whatever version of the tragedy he had planned.

Tom Lassiter drew up before Macdonald's gate while the dust of Dalton's going was still hanging there. The gaunt old homesteader with the cloud of sorrows in his eyes said that he had been on his way over to see what had become of Macdonald in his lone hunt for Mark Thorn. He had heard the shooting, and the sound had hurried him forward.

Macdonald told him what had happened, and took him in to see the wreckage left after that sudden storm. Tom shook his head as he stood in the yard looking down at the two dead men.

"Hell's a-goin' to pop now!" he said.

"I think you've said the word, Tom," Macdonald admitted. "They'll come back on me hard for this."

"You'll never have to stand up to 'em alone another time, I'll give you a guarantee on that, Mac."

"I'm glad to hear it," Macdonald replied, but wearily, and with no warmth or faith in his words.

"And they let that old scorpeen loose to skulk and kill ag'in!"

"Yes, he got away."

"They sure did oncork a hornet's nest when they come here this time, though, they sure did!" Tom stood in the door, looking into the darkening room and at the figure sprawled across the bed. "He-ell's a-goin' to pop now!" he said again, in slow words scarcely above his breath.

He turned his head searchingly, as if he expected to see the cloud of it already lowering out of the night.

CHAPTER XI

THE SEÑOR BOSS COMES RIDING

NOLA CHADRON had been a guest overnight at the post. She had come the afternoon before, bright as a bubble, and Frances had met her with a welcome as warm as if there never had been a shadow between them.

Women can do such things so much better than men. Balzac said they could murder under the cover of a kiss. Perhaps somebody else said it ahead of him; certainly a great many of us have thought it after. There is not one out of the whole world of them but is capable of covering the fire of lies in her heart with the rose leaves of her smiles.

Nola had come into Frances' room to do her hair, and employ her busy tongue while she plied the brush. She was a pretty bit of a figure in her fancily-worked Japanese kimono and red Turkish slippers — harem slippers, she called them, and thought it deliciously wicked to wear them — as she sat shaking back her bright hair like a giver of sunbeams.

Frances, already dressed in her soft light apparel of the morning, stood at the window watching the activity of the avenue below, answering encouragingly now and then, laughing at the right time, to keep the stream of her little guest's words running on. Frances seemed all softness and warmth, all

youth and freshness, as fair as a camellia in a sunny casement, there at the window with the light around her. Above that inborn dignity which every line of her body expressed, there was a domestic tranquillity in her subdued beauty that moved even irresponsible Nola with an admiration that she could not put into words.

"Oh, you soldiers!" said Nola, shaking her brush at Frances' placid back, "you get up so early and you dress so fast that you're always ahead of everybody else."

Frances turned to her, a smile for her childish complaint.

"You'll get into our soldiering ways in time, Nola. We get up early and live in a hurry, I suppose, because a soldier's life is traditionally uncertain, and he wants to make the most of his time."

"And love and ride away," said Nola, feigning a sigh.

"Do they?" asked Frances, not interested, turning to the window again.

"Of course," said Nola, positively.

> "Like the guardsmen of old England,
> Or the beaux sabreurs of France —"

that's an old border song, did you ever hear it?"

"No, I never did."

"It's about the Texas rangers, though, and not real soldiers like you folks. A cavalryman's wife wrote it; I've got it in a book."

"Maybe they do that way in Texas, Nola."

"How?"

"Love and ride away, as you said. I never heard of any of them doing it, except figuratively, in the regular army."

Nola suspended her brushing and looked at Frances curiously, a deeper color rising and spreading in her animated face.

"Oh, you little goose!" said she.

"Mostly they hang around and make trouble for people and fools of themselves," said Frances, in half-thoughtful vein, her back to her visitor, who had stopped brushing now, and was winding, a comb in her mouth.

Nola held her quick hand at the half-finished coil of hair while she looked narrowly at the outline of Frances' form against the window. A little squint of perplexity was in her eyes, and furrows in her smooth forehead. Presently she finished the coil with dextrous turn, and held it with outspread hand while she reached to secure it with the comb.

"I can't make you out sometimes, Frances, you're so funny," she declared. "I'm afraid to talk to you half the time"—which was in no part true—"you're so nunnish and severe."

"Oh!" said Frances, fully discounting the declaration.

No wonder that Major King was hard to wean from her, thought Nola, with all that grace of body and charm of word. Superiority had been born in

Frances Landcraft, not educated into her in expensive schools, the cattleman's daughter knew. It spoke for itself in the carriage of her head there against the light of that fair new day, with the sunshine on the dying cottonwood leaves beyond the windowpane; in the lifting of her neck, white as King David's tower of shields.

"Well, I *am* half afraid of you sometimes," Nola persisted. "I draw my hand back from touching you when you've got one of your soaring fits on you and walk along like you couldn't see common mortals and cowmen's daughters."

"Well, everybody isn't like you, Nola; there are some who treat me like a child."

Frances was thinking of her father and Major King, both of whom had continued to overlook and ignore her declaration of severance from her plighted word. The colonel had brushed it aside with rough hand and sharp word; the major had come penitent and in suppliance. But both of them were determined to marry her according to schedule, with no weight to her solemn denial.

"Mothers do that, right along," Nola nodded.

"Here's somebody else up early"—Frances held the curtain aside as she spoke, and leaned a little to see—"here's your father, just turning in."

"The señor boss?" said Nola, hurrying to the window.

Saul Chadron was mounting the steps booted and dusty, his revolvers belted over his coat. "I wonder

what's the matter? I hope it isn't mother — I'll run down and see."

The maid had let Chadron in by the time Nola opened the door of the room, and there she stood leaning and listening, her little head out in the hall, as if afraid to run to meet trouble. Chadron's big voice came up to them.

"It's all right," Nola nodded to Frances, who stood at her elbow, "he wants to see the colonel."

Frances had heard the cattleman's loud demand for instant audience. Now the maid was explaining in temporizing tones.

"The colonel he's busy with military matters this early in the day, sir, and nobody ever disturbs him. He don't see nobody but the officers. If you'll step in and wait —"

"The officers can wait!" Chadron said, in loud, assertive voice that made the servant shiver. "Where's he at?"

Frances could see in her lively imagination the frightened maid's gesture toward the colonel's office door. Now the girl's feet sounded along the hall in hasty retreat as Chadron laid his hearty knock against the colonel's panels.

Frances smiled behind her friend's back. The impatient disregard by civilians of the forms which her father held in such esteem always was a matter of humor to her. She expected now to hear explosions from within her father's sacred place, and when the sound failed to reach her she concluded that some

subordinate hand had opened the door to Chadron's summons.

"I'll hurry"—Nola dashed into her own room, finishing from the door—"I want to catch him before he goes and find out what's wrong."

Frances went below to see about breakfast for her tardy guest, a little fluttering of excitement in her own breast. She wondered what could have brought the cattleman to the post so early—he must have left long before dawn—and in such haste to see her father, all buckled about with his arms. She trusted that it might not be that Alan Macdonald was involved in it, for it was her constant thought to hope well for that bold young man who had heaved the homesteaders' world to his shoulders and stood straining, untrusted and uncheered, under its weight.

True, he had not died in defense of her glove, but she had forgiven him in her heart for that. A reasonable man would not have imperiled his life for such a trifle, and a reasonable woman would not have expected it. There was a great deal more sense in Alan Macdonald living for his life's purpose than in dying for a foolish little glove. So she said.

The white gossamer fichu about her throat moved as with a breath in the agitation of her bosom as she passed down the stairs; her imperious chin was lowered, and her strong brown eyes were bent like a nun's before the altar. Worthy or unworthy, her lips moved in a prayer for Alan Macdonald, strong

man in his obscure place; worthy or unworthy, she wished him well, and her heart yearned after him with a great tenderness, like a south wind roaming the night in gentle quest.

Major King, in attendance upon his chief, had opened the door to Saul Chadron at the colonel's frowning nod. Without waiting for the password into the mysteries of that chamber, Chadron had entered, his heavy quirt in hand, gauntlets to his elbows, dusty boots to his knees. Colonel Landcraft stood at his desk to receive him, his brows bent in a disfavoring frown.

"I've busted in on you, colonel, because my business is business, not a mess of reportin' and signin' up on nothing, like your fool army doin's." Chadron clamped with clicking spurs across the severe bare floor as he made this announcement, the frown of his displeasure in having been stopped at the door still dark on his face.

"I'm waiting your pleasure, sir," Colonel Landcraft returned, stiffly.

"I want twenty-five troopers and a cannon, and somebody that knows how to use it, and I want 'em right away!"

Chadron gave the order with a hotness about him, and an impatience not to be denied.

"Sir!" said Colonel Landcraft, throwing his bony shoulders back, his little blue eyes growing very cold and unfriendly.

"Them damn rustlers of Macdonald's are up and

standin' agin us, and I tell you I want troopers, and I want 'em on the spot!"

Colonel Landcraft swallowed like an eagle gorging a fish. His face grew red, he clamped his jaw, and held his mouth shut. It took him some little time to suppress his flooding emotions, and his voice trembled even when he ventured to trust himself to speak.

"That's a matter for your civil authorities, sir; I have nothing to do with it at all."

"You ain't got — nothing — ?" Chadron's amazement seemed to overcome him. He stopped, his eyes big, his mouth open; he turned his head from side to side in dumbfounded way, as if to find another to bear witness to this incredible thing.

"I tell you they're threatenin' my property, and the property of my neighbors!" protested Chadron, stunned, it seemed, that he should have to stop for details and explanations. "We've got millions invested — if them fellers gobbles up our land we're ruined!"

"Sir, I can sympathize with you in your unfortunate business, but if I had millions of my own at stake under similar conditions I would be powerless to employ, on my own initiative, the forces of the United States army to drive those brigands away."

Chadron looked at him hard, his hat on his head, where it had remained all the time, his eyes staring in unspeakable surprise.

"The hell you would!" said he.

"You and your neighbors surely can raise enough

men to crush the scoundrels, and hang their leader to a limb," the colonel suggested. "Call out your men, Chadron, and ride against him. I never took you for a man to squeal for help in a little affair like this."

"He's got as many as a hundred men organized, maybe twice that"—Chadron multiplied on the basis of damage that his men had suffered—"and my men tell me he's drillin' 'em like soldiers."

"I'm not surprised to hear that," nodded the colonel; "that man Macdonald's got it in him to do that, and fight like the devil, too."

"A gang of 'em killed three of my men a couple of days ago when I sent 'em up there to his shack to investigate a little matter, and Macdonald shot my foreman up so bad I guess he'll die. I tell you, man, it's a case for troopers!"

"What has the sheriff and the rest of you done to restore order?"

"I took twenty of my men up there yisterday, and a bunch of Sam Hatcher's from acrosst the river was to join us and smoke that wolf out of his hole and hang his damn hide on his cussed bob-wire fence. But hell! they was ditched in around that shack of his'n, I tell you, gentlemen, and he peppered us so hard we had to streak out of there. I left two of my men, and Hatcher's crew couldn't come over to help us, for them damn rustlers had breastworks throwed up over there and drove 'em away from the river. They've got us shut out from the only ford in thirty miles."

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the colonel, warming at this warlike news.

"Macdonald's had the gall to send me notice to keep out of that country up the river, and to run my cattle out of there, and it's my own land, by God! I've been grazin' it for eighteen years!"

"It looks like a serious situation," the colonel admitted.

"Serious!" There was scorn for the word and its weakness in Chadron's stress. "It's hell, I tell you, when a man can't set foot on his own land!"

"Are they all rustlers up there in the settlement? are there no honest homesteaders among them who would combine with you against this wild man and his unlawful followers?" the colonel wanted to know.

"Not a man amongst 'em that ain't cut the brand out of a hide," Chadron declared. "They've been nestin' up there under that man Macdonald for the last two years, and he's the brains of the pack. He gits his rake-off out of all they run off and sell. Me and the other cattlemen we've been feedin' and supportin' 'em till the drain's gittin' more'n we can stand. We've got to put 'em out, like a fire, or be eat up. We've got to hit 'em, and hit 'em hard."

"It would seem so," the colonel agreed.

"It's a state of war, I tell you, colonel; you're free to use your troops in a state of war, ain't you? Twenty-five troopers, with a little small cannon"—Chadron made illustration of the caliber that he considered adequate for the business with his hands—

"to knock 'em out of their ditches so we could pick 'em off as they scatter, would be enough; we can handle the rest."

"If there is anything that I can do for you in my private capacity, I am at your command," offered Colonel Landcraft, with official emptiness, "but I regret that I am powerless to grant your request for troops. I couldn't lift a finger in a matter like this without a department order; you ought to understand that, Chadron."

"Oh, if that's all that's bitin' you, go ahead — I'll take care of the department," Chadron told him, with the relieved manner of one who had seen a light.

"Sir!"

If Chadron had proposed treason the colonel could not have compressed more censure into that word.

"That's all right," Chadron assured him, comfortably; "I've got two senators and five congressmen back there in Washington that jigger when I jerk the gee-string. You can cut loose and come into this thing with a free hand, and go the limit, the department be damned if they don't like it!"

Colonel Landcraft's face was flaming angrily. He snapped his dry old eyelids like flints over the steel of his eyes, and stood as straight as the human body could be drawn, one hand on his sword hilt, the other pointing a trembling finger at Chadron's face.

"You cattlemen run this state, and one or two others here in the Northwest, I'm aware of that, Chadron. But there's one thing that you don't run,

and that's the United States army! I don't care a damn how many congressmen dance to your tune, you're not big enough to move even one trooper out of my barracks, sir! That's all I've got to say to you."

Chadron stood a little while, glowering at the colonel. It enraged him to be blocked in that manner by a small and inconsequential man. This he felt Colonel Landcraft to be, measured against his own strength and importance in that country. Himself and the other two big cattlemen in that section of the state lorded it over an area greater than two or three of the old states where the slipping heritage of individual liberty was born. Now here was a colonel in his way; one little old gray colonel!

"All right," Chadron said at length, charging his words with what he doubtless meant to be a significant foreboding, measuring Colonel Landcraft with contemptuous eye. "I can call out an army of my own. I came to you because we pay you fellers to do what I'm askin' of you, and because I thought it'd save me time. That's all."

"You came to me because you have magnified your importance in this country until you believe you're the entire nation," the colonel replied, very hot and red.

Chadron made no answer to that. He turned toward the military door, but Colonel Landcraft would not permit his unsanctified feet, great as they were and free to come and go as they liked in other

places, to pass that way. He frowned at Major King, who had stood by in silence all the time, like a good soldier, his eyes straight ahead. Major King touched Chadron's arm.

"This way, sir, if you please," he said.

Chadron started out, wrathfully and noisily. Halfway to the door he turned, his dark face sneering in contemptuous scorn.

"Yes, you're one hell of a colonel!" he said.

Major King was holding the door open; Chadron swung his big body around to face it, and passed out. Major King saluted his superior officer and followed the cattleman into the hall, closing the sacred door behind him on the wrathful little old soldier standing beside his desk. King extended his hand, sympathy in gesture and look.

"If I was in command of this post, sir, you'd never have to ask twice for troops," he said.

Chadron's sudden interest seemed to give him the movement of a little start. His grip on the young officer's hand tightened as he bent a searching look into his eyes.

"King, I believe you!" he said.

Nola came pattering down the stairs. Chadron stood with open arms, and swallowed her in them as she leaped from the bottom tread. Major King did not wait to see her emerge again, rosy and lip-tempting. There was unfinished business within the colonel's room.

A few minutes later Nola, excited to her finger-

ends, was retailing the story of the rustlers' uprising to Frances.

"Mother's all worked up over it; she's afraid they'll burn us out and murder us, but of course we'd clean them up before they'd ever get *that* far down the river."

"It looks to me like a very serious situation for everybody concerned," Frances said. "If your father brings in the men that you say he's gone to Meander to telegraph for, there's going to be a lot of killing done on both sides."

"Father says he's going to clean them out for good this time — they've cost us thousands of dollars in the past three years. Oh, you can't understand what a low-down bunch of scrubs those rustlers are!"

"Maybe not," Frances said, giving it up with a little sigh.

"I've got to go back to mother this morning, right away, but that little fuss up the river doesn't need to keep you from going home with me as you promised, Frances."

"I shouldn't mind, but I don't believe father will want me to go out into your wild country. I really want to go — I want to look around in your garden for a glove that I lost there on the night of the ball."

"Oh, why didn't you tell me?" Nola's face seemed to clear of something, a shadow of perplexity, it seemed, that Frances had seen in it from time to time since her coming there. She looked frankly and reprovingly at Frances.

"I didn't miss it until I was leaving, and I didn't want to delay the rest of them to look for it. It really doesn't matter."

"It's a wonder mother didn't find it; she's always prowling around among the flowers," said Nola, her eyes fixed in abstracted stare, as if she was thinking deeply of something apart from what her words expressed.

What she was considering, indeed, was that her little scheme of alienation had failed. Major King, she told herself, had not returned the glove to Frances. For all his lightness in the matter, perhaps he cared deeply for Frances, and would be more difficult to wean than she had thought. It would have to be begun anew. That Frances was ignorant of her treachery, as she now fully believed, made it easier. So the little lady told herself, surveying the situation in her quick brain, and deceiving herself completely, as many a shrewder schemer than she, when self-entangled in the devious plottings of this life.

On the other hand there sat Frances across the table — they were breakfasting alone, Mrs. Landcraft being a strict militarist, and always serving the colonel's coffee with her own hand — throwing up a framework of speculation on her own account. Perhaps if she should go to the ranch she might be in some manner instrumental in bringing this needless warfare to a pacific end. Intervention at the right time, in the proper quarter, might accomplish more

than strife and bloodshed could bring out of that one-sided war.

No matter for the justice of the homesteaders' cause, and the sincerity of their leader, neither of which she doubted or questioned, the weight of numbers and resources would be on the side of the cattlemen. It could result only in the homesteaders being driven from their insecure holdings after the sacrifice of many lives. If she could see Macdonald, and appeal to him to put down this foolish, even though well-intended strife, something might result.

It was an inconsequential turmoil, it seemed to her, there in that sequestered land, for a man like Alan Macdonald to squander his life upon. If he stood against the forces which Chadron had gone to summon, he would be slain, and the abundant promise of his life wasted like water on the sand.

"I'll go with you, Nola," she said, rising from the table in quick decision.

CHAPTER XII

"THE RUSTLERS!"

"I'VE stood up for that man, and I've stood by him," said Banjo Gibson, "but when a man shoots a friend of my friend he ain't no friend of mine. I'm done with him; I won't never set a boot-heel inside of his door ag'in."

Banjo was in Mrs. Chadron's south sitting-room, with its friendly fireplace and homely things, including Mrs. Chadron and her apparently interminable sock. Only now it was a gray sock, designed not for the mighty foot of Saul, but for Chance Dalton, lying on his back in the bunkhouse in a fever growing out of the handling that he had gone through at Macdonald's place.

Banjo had arrived at the ranch the previous evening. He was sitting now with his fiddle on his knee, having gone through the repertory most favored by his hostess, with the exception of "Silver Threads." That was an afternoon melody, Banjo maintained, and one would have strained his friendship and shaken his respect if he had insisted upon the musician putting bow to it in the morning hours.

"Yes," sighed Mrs. Chadron, "it was bad enough when he just shot cowboys, but when it come to Chance we felt real grieved. Chance he ain't much to

look at, but he's worth his weight in gold on the ranch."

"Busted his right arm all to pieces, they tell me?"

"Right here." Mrs. Chadron marked across her wrist with her knitting needle, and shook her head in heavy sadness.

"That'll kind of spile him, won't it?"

"Well, Saul says it won't make so much difference about him not havin' the use of his hand on that side if it don't break his nerve. A man loses confidence in himself, Saul says, most always when he loses the hand or arm he's slung his gun with all his life. He takes the notion that everybody's quicker'n he is, and just kind of slinges back and drops out of the game."

"Do you expect Saul he'll come back here with them soldiers he went after?"

"I expect he'll more'n likely order 'em right up the river to clear them rustlers out before he stops or anything," she replied, in high confidence.

"The gall of them low-down brand-burners standin' up to fight a man on his own land!" Banjo's indignation could not have been more pointed if he had been a lord of many herds himself.

"There comes them blessed girls!" reported Mrs. Chadron from her station near the window. Banjo crossed over to see, his fiddle held to his bosom like an infant. Nola and Frances were nearing the gate.

"That colonel girl she's a up-setter, ain't she?" Banjo admired.

"She's as sweet as locus' blooms," Mrs. Chadron declared, unstintingly.

"But she's kind of distant; nothing friendly and warm-hearted like your little Nola, mom."

"She's a little cool to strangers, but when she knows a body she comes out."

Banjo nodded, drawing little whispers of melody from his fiddle-strings by fingering them against the neck.

"I noticed when she smiles she seems to change," he said. "It's like puttin' bow to the strings. A fiddle's a glum kind of a thing till you wake it up; she's that way, I reckon."

"Well, git ready for dinner — or lunch, as Nola calls it — they'll be starved by this time, ridin' all the way from the post in this chilly wind. I'm mighty afraid we're goin' to have some weather before long."

"Can't put it off much longer," Banjo agreed, thinking of the hardship of being caught out in one of those sweeping blizzards, when the sudden cold grew so sharp that a man's banjo strings broke in the tense contraction. That had happened to him more than once, and it only seemed to sharpen the pleasure of being snowed in at a place like Alamito, where the kitchen was fat and the hand of the host free. He smiled as he turned to the kitchen to wash his face and soap his hair.

They passed a very pleasant afternoon at the ranchhouse, in spite of Mrs. Chadron's uneasiness on

account of their defenseless state. At that season Chadron and his neighbors could not draw very heavily on their scattered forces following the divided herds spread out over the vast territory for the winter grazing.

The twenty men gathered in a hurry-call by Chadron to avenge the defeat of Chance Dalton, who had in their turn been met and unexpectedly repulsed by the homesteaders, as Chadron had related in his own way to Colonel Landcraft, were lying in camp several miles up the river. That is, all that were left of them fit for duty after the fight. A good many of them were limping, and would limp for many a day.

They were waiting the arrival of the troops, which they expected with the same confidence Mrs. Chadron had held before Nola brought her an explanation that covered the confusion of refusal.

Neither of the young women knew of the tiff between the colonel and Chadron, for the colonel was a man who kept his family apart from his business. Chadron had not seen fit to uncover his humiliation to his daughter, but had told her that he was acting on the advice of Colonel Landcraft in sending to his friends in Cheyenne for men to put down the uprising of rustlers himself.

So there were comfortable enough relations between them all at the ranch as the day bent to evening and the red sunset changed to gray. Banjo played for them, as he had done that other afternoon, and sang

his sentimental songs in voice that quavered in the feeling passages. Chadron had not left anybody to guard the house, because he knew very well that Macdonald considered nothing beyond defense, and that he would as quickly burn his own mother's roof above her head as he would set torch to that home by the riverside.

"Sing us that dreamy one, Banjo," Nola requested, "the one that begins 'Come sit by my side little—' you know the one I mean."

A sentimental tenderness came into Banjo's face. He turned his head so that he could look out of the window into the thickening landscape beyond the corral gate, gray and mysterious and unfriendly now as a twilight sea. Nola touched Frances' arm to prime her for the treat.

"Watch his face," she whispered, smiling behind her hand.

Banjo struck the chords of his accompaniment; the sentimental cast of his face deepened, until it seemed that he was about to come to tears. He sang:

> Come sit by my side litt-ul dau-ling,
> And lay your brown head on my breast,
> Whilse the angels of twilight o-round us
> Are singing the flow-ohs to rest.

Banjo must have loved many ladies in many lands, for that is the gift and the privilege of the troubadour. Now he seemed calling up their vanished faces out of the twilight as he sang his little song. What

feeling he threw into the chorus, what shaking of the voice, what soft sinking away of the last notes, the whang of the banjo softened by palm across the strings!

The chorus:

> O, what can be sweet-o than dreaming
> Tho dream that is on us tonight!
> Pre-haps do you know litt-ul dau-ling,
> Tho future lies hidded from sight.

There was a great deal more of that song, which really was not so bad, the way Banjo sang it, for he exalted it on the best qualities that lived in his harmless breast; not so bad that way, indeed, as it looks in print. Frances could not see where the joke at the little musician's expense came in, although Nola was laughing behind his unsuspecting back as the last notes died.

Mrs. Chadron wiped her eyes. "I think it's the sweetest song that ever was sung!" she said, and meant it, every word.

Banjo said nothing at all, but put away his instrument with reverent hands, as if no sound was worthy to come out of it after that sweet agony of love.

Mrs. Chadron got up, in her large, bustling, hospitable way, sentimentally satisfied, and withal grossly hungry.

"Supper'll be about ready now, children," she said, putting her sock away in its basket, "and while you two are primpin' I'll run down to the

bunkhouse and take some chicken broth to Chance that Maggie made him."

"Oh, poor old Chance!" Nola pitied, "I've been sitting here enjoying myself and forgetting all about him. I'll take it down to him, mother — Banjo he'll come with me."

Banjo was alert on the proposal, and keen to go. He brought Nola's coat at her mother's suggestion, for the evening had a feeling of frost in it, and attended her to the kitchen after the chicken broth as gallantly as if he wore a sword.

Mrs. Chadron came back from her investigations in the kitchen in a little while to Frances, who waited alone before the happy little fire in the chimney. She sighed as she resumed her rocking-chair by the window, and crossed her seldom idle hands over her comfortably inelegant front.

"It'll be some little time before supper's ready to set down to," she announced regretfully. "Maggie's makin' stuffed peppers, and they're kind of slow to bake. We can talk."

"Of course," Frances agreed, her mind running on the hope that had brought her to the ranch; the hope of seeing Macdonald, and appealing to him in pity's name for peace.

"That thievin' Macdonald's to blame for Chance, our foreman, losin' the use of his right hand," Mrs. Chadron said, with asperity. "Did Nola tell you about the fight they had with him?"

"Yes, she told me about it as we came."

"It looks like the devil's harnessed up with that man, he does so much damage without ever gittin' hurt himself. He had a crowd of rustlers up there with him when Chance went up there to trace some stock, and they up and killed three of our cowboys. Ain't it terrible?"

"It is terrible!" Frances shuddered, withholding her opinion on which side the terror lay, together with the blame.

"Then Saul went up there with some more of the men to burn that Macdonald's shack and drive him off of our land, and they run into a bunch of them rustlers that Macdonald he'd fetched over there, and two more of our men was killed. It looks like a body's got to fight night and day for his rights now, since them nesters begun to come in here. Well, we was here first, and Saul says we'll be here last. But I think it's plumb scan'lous the way them rustlers bunches together and fights. They never was known to do it before, and they wouldn't do it now if it wasn't for that black-hearted thief, Macdonald!"

"Did you ever see him?" Frances asked.

"No, I never did, and don't never want to!"

"I just asked you because he doesn't look like a bad man."

"They say he sneaked in here the night of Nola's dance, but I didn't see him. Oh, what 'm I tellin' you? Course you know *that*—you danced with him!"

"Yes," said Frances, neither sorry nor ashamed.

"But you wasn't to blame, honey," Mrs. Chadron comforted, "you didn't know him from Adamses off ox."

Frances sat leaning forward, looking into the fire. The light of the blaze was on her face, appealingly soft and girlishly sweet. Mrs. Chadron laid a hand on her hair in motherly caress, moved by a tenderness quite foreign to the vindictive creed which she had pronounced against the nesters but a little while before.

"I'm afraid you're starved, honey," she said, in genuine solicitude, thus expressing the nearest human sympathy out of her full-feeding soul.

"I'm hungry, but far from starving," Frances told her, knowing that the confession to an appetite would please her hostess better than a gift. "When do you expect Mr. Chadron home?"

"I don't know, honey, but you don't need to worry; them rustlers can't pass our men Saul left camped up the valley."

"I wasn't thinking of that; I'm not afraid."

Mrs. Chadron chuckled. "Did I tell you about Nola?" she asked. Then, answering herself, before Frances could more than turn her head inquiringly; "No, of course, I never. It was too funny for anything!"

"What was it?" Frances asked, in girlish eagerness. Mrs. Chadron's smile was reflected in her face as she sat straight, and turned expectantly to her hostess.

"The other evening when she and her father was comin' home from the postoffice over at the agency they run acrosst that sneak Macdonald, afoot in the road, guns so thick on him you couldn't count 'em. Saul asked him what he was skulkin' around down this way for, and the feller he was kind of sassy about it, and tried to pass Nola and go on. He had the gall to tip his hat to her, just like *she* was low enough to notice a brand-burner! Well, she give him a larrup over the face with her whip that cut the hide! He took hold of her bridle to shove her horse out of the way so he could run, I reckon, and she switched him till he squirmed like a puppy-dog! I laughed till I nearly split when Saul told me!"

Mrs. Chadron surrendered again to her keen appreciation of the humor in that situation. Frances felt now that she understood the attitude of the cattlemen toward the homesteaders as she never had even sensed it before. Here was this motherly woman, naturally good at heart and gentle, hardened and blinded by her prejudices until she could discuss murder as a thing desired, and the extirpation of a whole community as a just and righteous deed.

There was no feeling of softness in her breast for the manful strivings of Alan Macdonald to make a home in that land, not so much for himself — for it was plain that he would grace a different world to far better advantage — but for the disinherited of the earth. To Mrs. Chadron he was a thing apart from her species, a horrible, low, grisly monster, to

whom the earth should afford no refuge and man no hiding-place. There was no virtue in Alan Macdonald; his fences had killed his right to human consideration.

In a moment Mrs. Chadron was grave again. She put out her hand in that gentle, motherly way and touched Frances' hair, smoothing it from her forehead, pleased with the irrepressible life of it which sprung it back after the passage of her palm like water in a vessel's wake.

"I let on to you a little while ago that I wasn't uneasy, honey," she said, "but I ain't no hand at hidin' the truth. I am uneasy, honey, and on pins, for I don't trust them rustlers. I'm afraid they'll hear that Saul's gone, and come sneakin' down here and burn us out before morning, and do worse, maybe. I don't know why I've got that feelin', but I have, and it's heavy in me, like raw dough."

"I don't believe they'd do anything like that," Frances told her.

"Oh, you don't know 'em like we do, honey, the low-down thieves! They ort to be hunted like wolves and shot, wherever they're found."

"Some of them have wives and children, haven't they?" Frances asked, thinking aloud, as she sat with her chin resting in her hand.

"Oh, I suppose they litter like any other wolves," Mrs. Chadron returned, unfeelingly.

"*Si a tu ventana llega una paloma*," sang Maggie in the kitchen, the snapping of the oven door coming

in quite harmoniously as she closed it on the baking peppers. Mrs. Chadron sighed.

"*Tratala con cariña que es mi persona,*" sounded Maggie, a degree louder. Mrs. Chadron sat upright, with a new interest in life apart from her uneasy forebodings about the rustlers. Maggie was in the dining-room, spreading the cloth. The peppers were coming along.

Somebody burst into the kitchen; uncertain feet came across it; a cry broke Maggie's song short as she jingled the silver in place on the cloth. Banjo Gibson stumbled into the room where the low fire twinkled in the chimney, reeling on his legs, his breath coming in groans.

Maggie was behind him, holding the door open; the light from the big lamp on the dining-table fell on the musician, who weaved there as if he might fall. His hat was off, blood was in his eyes and over his face from a wound at the edge of his hair.

"Nola—Nola!" he gasped.

Mrs. Chadron, already beside him, laid hold of him now and shook him.

"Tell it, you little devil—tell it!" she screamed.

Frances, with gentler hand, drew Banjo from her.

"What's happened to Nola?" she asked.

"The rustlers!" he said, his voice falling away in horror.

"The rustlers!" Mrs. Chadron groaned, her arms lifted above her head. She ran in wild distraction into the dining-room, now back to the chimney to

take down a rifle that hung in its case on a deer prong over the mantel.

"Nola, Nola!" she called, running out into the garden. Her wild voice came back from there in a moment, crying her daughter's name in agony.

Banjo had sunk to the floor, his battered face held in his hands.

"My God! they took her!" he groaned. "The rustlers, they took her, and I couldn't lift a hand!"

Frances beckoned to Maggie, who had followed her mistress to the kitchen door.

"Give him water; stop the blood," she ordered sharply.

In a moment she had dashed out after Mrs. Chadron, and was running frantically along the garden path toward the river.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRAIL AT DAWN

FRANCES stopped at the high wire fence along the river bank. It was dark there between the shrubs of the garden on one hand and the tall willows on the other, but nothing moved in them but her own leaping heart. She called Mrs. Chadron, running along the fence as she cried her name.

Mrs. Chadron answered from the barn. Frances found her saddling a horse, while Maggie's husband, an old Mexican with a stiff leg, muttered prayers in his native tongue as he tightened the girths on another.

Mrs. Chadron was for riding in pursuit of Nola's abductors, although she had not mounted a horse in fifteen years. There was no man about the place except crippled old Alvino, and wounded Dalton lying in the men's quarters near at hand. Neither of them was serviceable in such an emergency, and Banjo, willing as he would be, seemed too badly hurt to be of any use.

Frances pressed her to dismiss this intention. Even if they knew which way to ride, it would be a hopeless pursuit.

"There's only one way to go—towards the rustlers' settlement," Mrs. Chadron grimly returned.

She was over her hysterical passion now, and

steadied down into a state of desperate determination to set out after the thieves and bring Nola back. She did not know how it was to be accomplished, but she felt her strength equal to any demand in the pressure of her despair. She was lifting her foot to the stirrup, thinly dressed as she was, her head bare, the rifle in her hand, when Frances took her by the arm.

"You can't go alone with Alvino, Mrs. Chadron."

"I've got to go, I tell you — let loose of me!"

She shook off Frances' restraining hand and turned to her horse again. With her hand on the pommel of the saddle she stopped, and turned to Alvino.

"Go and fetch me Chance's guns out of the bunk-house," she ordered.

Alvino hitched away, swinging his stiff leg, with laborious, slow gait.

"You couldn't do anything against a crowd of desperate men — they might kill you!" Frances said.

"Let 'em kill me, then!" She lifted her hand, as if taking an oath. "They'll pay for this trick — every man, woman, and child of them'll bleed for what they've done to me tonight!"

"Let Alvino go to the camp up the river where Mr. Chadron left the men, and tell them; they can do more than you."

"You couldn't drive him alone out of sight of the lights in the house with fire. He'd come back with some kind of a lie before he'd went a mile. I'll go to 'em myself, honey — I didn't think of them."

"I'll go with you."

"Wait till Alvino comes with them guns — I can use 'em better than I can a rifle. Oh, why don't the man hurry!"

"I'll run down and see what —"

But Alvino came around the corral at that moment. He had stopped to light a lantern, in his peculiar Mexican mode of estimating the importance of time and occasion, and came flashing it in short, violent arcs as he swayed to swing his jointless leg.

Frances led out the other horse and was waiting to mount when Alvino came panting up, the belt with its two revolvers over his arm. Mrs. Chadron jerked it from him with something hard and sharp on her tongue like a curse. Banjo Gibson came into the circle of light, a bandage on his head.

"I didn't even see 'em. They knocked me down, and when I come to she was gone!"

Banjo's voice was full of self-censure, and his feet were weak upon the ground. He began to talk the moment the light struck him, and when he had finished his little explanation he was standing beside Mrs. Chadron's saddle.

"Go to the house and lie down, Banjo," Mrs. Chadron said; "I ain't time to fool with you!"

"Are you two aimin' to go to the post after help?" Banjo steadied himself on his legs by clinging to the horse's mane as he spoke.

"We're goin' up the river after the men," Mrs. Chadron told him.

"No, I'll go after the men; that's a man's job," Banjo insisted. "I know right where they're camped at, you couldn't find 'em between now and morning."

There was no arguing Banjo out of it, no brushing the little man aside. He was as firm as a man three times his weight, and he took Mrs. Chadron by the arm, like a son, and led her away from the horse with a manner at once so firm and yet considerate that it softened her stern heart and plunged her into tears.

"If you bring Nola back to me I'll give her to you, Banjo! I'll give her to you!" she sobbed, as she belted him with Chance Dalton's guns.

"If any reward in this world could drive me through hell fire to lay my hands on it, you've named it," he said.

Frances saw that Mrs. Chadron could be reasoned with now, and she was grateful to Banjo for his opportune arrival. For the night was vast and unfriendly over that empty land, and filled with a thousand shudderful dangers. She was afraid of it, afraid to leave the lights of the house behind her and ride out into it, no matter for all the peril that poor little Nola might be facing in that cruel hour.

Banjo rode away. They stood clinging to each other in the dim circle of Alvino's lantern-light, listening to his horse until the distance muffled its feet on the road.

Frances was chilled with the horror of that brigandish act. Every movement of the wind in the bushes made her skin crinkle and creep; every sound

of animals in barn and corral was magnified into some new danger. Mrs. Chadron was in far worse state, with reason, certainly, for being so. Now that the stimulation of her first wild outburst had been exhausted, she stood wilted and weak, shivering with her hands over her eyes, moaning and moaning in piteous low wail.

Frances took the lantern from old Alvino's shaking hand.

"Let's go and look for their tracks," she suggested, forcing a note of eagerness into her words, "so we can tell the men, when they come back to pick up the trail, how many there were and which way they went."

"Oh, if Chance was only able to go after them, if he was only able!" Mrs. Chadron wailed, following Frances as she hurried along the wire fence that cut the garden from the river.

"It was somebody that knowed the lay of the land," Mrs. Chadron said, "for that gate down there back of the house is open. That's the way they come and went — somebody that knowed the lay of the land."

Frances felt her heart die within her as the recollection of another night in that garden flashed like red fire in her mind. There was a picture, as she stopped with closed eyes, struck cold and shuddering by a fear she dared not own, of one flying, bent into the shadows, along the garden path toward that gate. Someone who knew the "lay of the land!"

"Did you hear something?" Mrs. Chadron whispered, leaning close to her where she had stopped, stock-still, as if she had struck a wall.

"I thought I—I—saw something," Frances answered, in faint, sick voice.

The white gate was swinging as the invaders had left it, and in the soft ground beyond it they found tracks.

"Only one man!" said Mrs. Chadron, bending over.

"There's only one track," said Frances, her breath so feeble, her heart laboring so weakly that she believed that she must die.

Alvino came up, and took the lead in tracking, with the aptness for that trick that goes with primitive minds such as his. Even in the farthest glimmer of the light he could pick up the trail, and soon he led them to the willows where the ravisher's horse had been concealed.

"One shoe was lost," said he, pointing, "left one, hind foot."

Mrs. Chadron stood looking in the direction that the rider had gone with his precious burden, her eyes straining into the dark.

"Oh, if I'd 'a' come down here place of saddlin' that horse!" she lamented, with a pang for her lost opportunity.

"He'd have been gone, even then—I was past here and didn't hear him," Frances said.

Still the vision persisted in her disturbed imagina-

tion of that other night, of one leaning low in the saddle, his fleet horse stretching its neck in desperation for the distant refuge; the dash of pursuing hoofs; the sound of shots up the river; the prayer that she sent to heaven in his behalf.

"Well, it was somebody that knowed the lay of the land," Mrs. Chadron was repeating, with accusing conviction.

They returned to the house, having done all that they could do. It was doubtful whether the dumb, plethoric nature of Mrs. Chadron made her capable of suffering as Frances suffered, even with her greater reason for pain of that cruel bereavement. Imaginative, refined, sensitive as a harp, Frances reflected every wild wrench of horror that Nola herself must have been suffering as the horseman bore her along in the thick night. She felt that she must scream, but that some frightful thing smothered the voice that struggled in her throat; that she must leap and flee away, but a cloying power was heavy on her limbs, binding her as if her feet were set in lava.

Somebody that knew the "lay of the land." Great God! could he fight that way, was it in Alan Macdonald to make a hawk's dash like that? It was hard to admit the thought, to give standing to the doubtful accusation. But those whom they called "rustlers" must have borne Nola away. Beyond the homesteaders up the river were the mountains and the wild country where no man made his home; except them and the cattlemen and the cowboys attending the

herds, that country was unpeopled. There was nobody to whom the deed could be charged but the enemies that Chadron had made in his persecution of the homesteaders.

Perhaps they were not of the type that Macdonald described; maybe the cattlemen were just in their arraignment of them for thieves and skulking rascals, and Macdonald was no better than the reputation that common report gave him. The mere fact of his defense of them in words, and his association with them, seemed to convict him there in the silence of that black-walled court of night.

It was either that he was blinded to the deviltries of his associates by his own high intentions, or as shrewdly dishonest as any scoundrel that ever rode the wilds. He could be that, and carry it off before a sharper judge than she. So she said, finding it hard to excuse his blindness, if blindness it might be; unable to mitigate in any degree the blame, even passive knowledge of the intent, of that base offense.

At length, through all the fog of her groping and piecing together, she reached what she believed to be the motive which lay behind the deed. The rustlers doubtless were aware of the blow that Chadron was preparing to deliver upon them in retaliation for his recent losses. They had carried off his daughter to make her the price of their own immunity, or else to extract from him a ransom that would indemnify them for quitting their lairs in the land upon which they preyed.

She explained this to Mrs. Chadron when it became clear to her own mind. Mrs. Chadron seemed to draw considerable hope from it that she should receive her daughter back again unharmed in a little while.

The rest of the night the two women spent at the gate, and in the road up and down in front of it, straining for the sound of a hoof that might bring them tidings. Mrs. Chadron kept up a moaning like an infant whose distress no mind can read, no hand relieve. Now and then she burst into a shrill and sudden cry, and time and again she imagined that she heard Nola calling her, and dashed off along the road with answering shout, to come back to her sad vigil at the gate by and by on Frances' arm, crushed by this one great and sudden sorrow of her life.

Frances cheered her as much as might be with promises of the coming day. At the first streak of dawn, she told Mrs. Chadron, she would ride to the post and engage her father in the quest for the stolen girl. Soldiers would be thrown out over the country for miles on every side; the cowards would be hemmed in within a matter of hours, and Nola would be at home, laughing over the experiences of her tragic night.

Frances was in the saddle at daybreak. She had left Mrs. Chadron in an uneasy sleep, watched over by Maggie. Banjo had not returned; no word had reached them from any source. Alvino let Frances out through the gate at the back of the garden, for it was her intention to follow the abductor's trail as

far as possible without being led into strange country. Somebody, or some wandering herd of cattle, might pass that way and obliterate the traces before pursuers could be brought there.

The tracks of the raider's horse were deep in the soft soil. She followed them as they cut across the open toward the river road, angling northward. At a place where the horse had stopped and made a trampling in the lose earth — testimony of the fight that Nola had made to get away — Frances started at the sight of something caught on a clump of bullberry bushes close at hand. She drew near the object cautiously, leaning and looking in the half light of early morning. Presently assured, she reached out and picked it up, and rode on with it in her hand.

Presently the trail merged into the river road, where hoofprints were so numerous that Frances was not skilful enough to follow it farther. But it was something to have established that the scoundrel was heading for the homesteaders' settlement, and that he had taken the road openly, as if he had nothing to fear. Also, that bit of evidence picked from the bushes might serve its purpose in the right time and place.

She felt again that surge of indignation that had fired her heart early in the sad night past. The man who had lurked in the garden waiting his chance to snatch Nola away, was certain of the protection to which he fled. It was the daring execution of one man, but the planning of many, and at the head of

them one with fire in his wild soul, quick passion in his eyes, and mastery over his far-riding band. It could be no other way.

When she came to the branching of the roads she pulled up her horse and sat considering her course a little while. Presently she rode forward again, but not on the road that led to the army post.

She had proceeded a mile, perhaps, along the road branching to the homesteaders' settlement, upon which she knew Macdonald's claim to lie somewhere up the river, when she rounded an elbow screened by tall-growing greasewood and came face to face with a small cavalcade of dusty men. At the head of them Alan Macdonald rode, beside an old man whose neck was guttered like a wasted candle and his branching great mustache gray as the dust on his bony shoulders.

She halted when she saw them, and they jerked up their horses also, with startled suddenness, like men riding in the expectation of danger and surprise. Macdonald came forward in a moment, with respectful salute, a look amounting almost to frightened questioning in his face. For the sun was not up yet, although its flame was on the heavens, and it was a strange, wild place to meet a woman of Frances Landcraft's caste unattended, and with the shadow of a trouble in her face that made it old, like misery.

But there was no question of the unfriendliness of that face for Alan Macdonald and the men who came riding at his back. It was as cold as the gray earth

beneath her horse's hoofs, and its severity was reflected in the very pose of her body, even in the grip of her slender thighs as they clasped her saddle, sitting there like a dragoon outrider who had appeared to bar their way.

Frances was wearing the brown corduroy riding-habit that she had worn on the day when she first spoke to him. Her brown hair had fallen down until it hid her ears, for she had ridden hard, and a strand of it blew from beneath her cowboy hat in unheeded caress across her cheek.

Macdonald saw her stiffen in the saddle and lift herself a little from her seat as he drew near, his companions stopping a little distance back. Her eyes were stern and reproachful; a little frown troubled her white forehead.

"I was starting out to find you, Mr. Macdonald," she said, severely.

"If there is any service, Miss Landcraft—"

"Don't talk emptiness, and don't pretend!" she said, a flash of anger in her face. "It isn't a man's way to fight, it's a coward's! Bring her back home!"

"I don't know what you mean." There was such an astonished helplessness in his manner that it would have convinced any unprejudiced mind of his innocence in itself.

"Oh!"—impatiently—"I can't hurt you, I'm alone. You'd just as well tell me how much money you're going to demand, so I can set their minds at rest."

Macdonald's face was hot; his eyes felt as if they swam in fire. He put out his hand in a gesture almost a command, his heavy eyebrows gathered in a frown, an expression of sternness in his homely face that made it almost majestic.

"If you'll be good enough to tell me what your veiled accusations point to, Miss Landcraft, then I can answer you by either yes or no."

She unbent so far as to relate briefly what she believed they knew better than herself already. But behind her high air as she talked there was a secret warm feeling for the strength of this man. It was a quality of fine steel in the human mind and body such as she never had seen so beautifully blended before. In her own father there was something of it, but only a reflection on water compared to this. It seemed the temper of the desert, she thought, like that oriental spirit which spread Islam's dark creed over half the world.

When she had finished the relation of Nola's ravishment, he sat with head drooped in dusty silence a moment. Then he looked her in the eyes with such a steady blaze of indignation that she felt her own rage kindle to meet it. His clear, steady gaze was an arraignment, an accusation on the ugly charge of perversion of the truth as she knew it to be in the bottom of her conscience when she had laid the crime at the homesteaders' hands. If he saw her at all, she thought, it was as some small despicable thing, for his eyes were so unflinching, as they poured their

steady fire into her own, that he seemed to be summing up the final consequences which lay behind her, along the dusty highway to the ranchhouse by the river.

"In the first place," said he, speaking slowly, "there are no cattle thieves among the homesteaders in the settlement up the river, Miss Landcraft. I have told you this before. Here, I want you to meet some of them, and judge for yourself."

He beckoned to Tom Lassiter and the three with him, and they joined him there before her. In a few words he told them who she was and the news that she carried, as well as the accusation that went with it.

"These men, their neighbors, and myself not only had no hand in this deed, but there's not one among us that wouldn't put down his life to keep that young woman from harm and give her back to her home. We have our grievances against Saul Chadron, God knows! and they are grave enough. But we don't fight that way, Miss Landcraft."

"If you're innocent, then prove it by forcing the men that carried her off, or the man, if there was only one, to bring her back home. Then I'll believe you. Maybe others will, too. What are you riding the road so early for, all armed and suspicious, if you're such honest men?"

"We're goin' to the agency after ammunition to defend our homes, and our wives and children — such of us as Saul Chadron and his hired hounds has left

children to, colonel's daughter," Tom Lassiter answered, reproof in his kind old eyes.

Frances had unrolled the bit of evidence that she had picked up from the bushes, and was holding it on the horn of her saddle now, quite unconscious of what her hands were doing, for she had forgotten the importance of her find in the heat of that meeting. Macdonald spurred forward, pointing to the thing in her hand.

"Where did you get that?" he asked, a sharp note of concern in his voice that made her start.

She told him. He took it from her and turned to his comrades.

"It's Mark Thorn's cap!" he said, holding it up, his fingers in the crown.

Tom Lassiter nodded his slow head as the others leaned to look.

"Saul Chadron's chickens has come home to roost," he said.

Frances understood nothing of the excitement that sprung out of the mention of the outlaw's name, for Mark Thorn and his bloody history were alike unknown to her. Her resentment mounted at being an outsider to their important or pretended secret.

"Well, if you know whose cap it is, it ought to be easy for you to find the owner," she said, unable to smother the sneer in her words.

"He isn't one of us," said a homesteader, with grim shortness.

"Oh!" said she, tossing her lofty head.

There was a pallor in Macdonald's weathered face, as if somebody near and dear to himself was in extreme peril.

"She may never see home again," he said. Then quickly: "Which way did he go, do you know?"

She told him what she knew, not omitting the lost horseshoe. Tom Lassiter bent in his saddle with eagerness as she mentioned that particular, and ran his eyes over the road like one reading the pages of a book.

"There!" he said, pointing, "I've been seein' it all the way down, Alan. He was headin' for the hills."

Frances could not see the print of the shoeless hoof, nor any peculiarity among the scores of tracks that would tell her of Nola's abductor having ridden that far along the road. She flushed as the thought came to her that this was a trick to throw her attention from themselves and the blame upon some fictitious person, when they knew whose hands were guilty all the time. The men were leaning in their saddles, riding slowly back on their trail, talking in low voices and sharp exclamations among themselves. She spurred hotly after them.

"Mr. Chadron hasn't come home yet," she said, addressing Macdonald, who sat straight in his saddle to hear, "but they expect him any hour. If you'll say how much you're going to demand, and where you want it paid, I'll carry the word to him. It might hurry matters, and save her mother's life."

"I'm sorry you repeated that," said Macdonald, touching his hat in what he plainly meant a farewell salute. He turned from her and drew Tom Lassiter aside. In a moment he was riding back again the way that he had come.

Frances looked at the unaccountable proceeding with the eyes of doubt and suspicion. She did not believe any of them, and had no faith in their mysterious trackings and whisperings aside, and mad gallopings off to hidden ends. As for Tom Lassiter and his companions, they ranged themselves preparatory to continuing their journey.

"If you're goin' our way, colonel's daughter," said Tom, gathering up his bridle-reins, "we'll be proud to ride along with you."

Frances was looking at the dust-cloud that rose behind Macdonald. He was no longer in sight.

"Where has he gone?" she inquired, her suspicion growing every moment.

"He's gone to find that cowman's child, young lady, and take her home to her mother," Tom replied, with dignity. He rode on. She followed, presently gaining his side.

"Is there such a man as Mark Thorn?" she asked after a little, looking across at Lassiter with sly innuendo.

"No, there ain't no man by that name, but there's a devil in the shape of a human man called that," he answered.

"Is he — what does he do?" She reined a little

nearer to Lassiter, feeling that there was little harm in him apart from the directing hand.

"He hires out to kill off folks that's in the way of the cattlemen at so much a head, miss; like some hires out to kill off wolves. The Drovers' Association hires him, and sees that he gits out of jail if anybody ever puts him in, and fixes it up so he walks safe with the blood of no knowin' how many innocent people on his hands. That's what Mark Thorn does, ma'am. Chadron brought him in here a couple of weeks ago to do some killin' off amongst us homesteaders so the rest 'd take a scare and move out. He give that old devil a list of twenty men he wanted shot, and Alan Macdonald's got that paper. His own name's at the top of it, too."

"Oh!" said she, catching her breath sharply, as if in pain. Her face was white and cold. "Did he — did he — kill anybody here?"

"He killed my little boy; he shot him down before his mother's eyes!"

Tom Lassiter's guttered neck was agitated; the muscles of his bony jaw knotted as he clamped his teeth and looked straight along the road ahead of him.

"Your little boy! Oh, what a coward he must be!"

"He was a little tow-headed feller, and he had his mother's eyes, as blue as robins' eggs," said Tom, his reminiscent sorrow so poignant that tears sprung to her eyes in sympathy and plashed down unheeded

and unchecked. "He'd 'a' been fifteen in November. Talkin' about fightin', ma'am, that's the way some people fights."

"I'm sorry I said that, Mr. Lassiter," she confessed, hanging her head like a corrected child.

"He can't hear you now," said Tom.

They rode on a little way. Tom told her of the other outrages for which Thorn was accountable in that settlement. She was amazed as deeply as she was shocked to hear of this, for if any word of it had come to the post, it had been kept from her. Neither was it ever mentioned in Chadron's home.

"No," said Tom, when she mentioned that, "it ain't the kind of news the cattlemen spreads around. But if we shoot one of them in defendin' our own, the news runs like a pe-rairie fire. They call us rustlers, and come ridin' up to swipe us out. Well, they's goin' to be a change."

"But if Chadron brought that terrible man in here, why should the horrible creature turn against him?" she asked, doubt and suspicion grasping the seeming fault in Lassiter's tale.

"Chadron refused to make settlement with him for the killin' he done because he didn't git Macdonald. Thorn told Alan that with his own bloody tongue."

Lassiter retailed to her eager ears the story of Macdonald's capture of Thorn, and his fight with Chadron's men when they came to set the old slayer free, as Lassiter supposed.

"They turned him loose," said he, "and you know

now what I meant when I said Chadron's chickens has come home to roost."

"Yes, I know now." She turned, and looked back. Remorse was heavy on her for the injustice she had done Macdonald that day, and shame for her sharp words bowed her head as she rode at old Tom Lassiter's hand.

"He'll run the old devil down ag'in," Tom spoke confidently, as of a thing that admitted no dispute, "and take that young woman home if he finds her livin'. Many thanks he'll git for it from them and her. Like as not she'll bite the hand that saves her, for she's a cub of the old bear. Well, let me tell you, colonel's daughter, if she was to live a thousand years, and pray all her life, she wouldn't no more than be worthy at the end to wash that man's feet with her tears and dry 'em on her hair, like that poor soul you've read about in the Book."

Frances slowed her horse as if overcome by a sudden indecision, and turned in her saddle to look back again. Again she had let him go away from her misunderstood, his high pride hurt, his independent heart too lofty to bend down to the mean adjustment to be reached through argument or explanation. One must accept Alan Macdonald for what his face proclaimed him to be. She knew that now. He was not of the mean-spirited who walk among men making apology for their lives.

"He's gone on," said Lassiter, slowing his horse to her pace.

"I'm afraid I was hasty and unjust," she confessed, struggling to hold back her tears.

"Yes, you was," said Lassiter, frankly, "but everybody on the outside is unjust to all of us up here. We're kind of outcasts because we fence the land and plow it. But I want to tell you, Macdonald's a man amongst men, ma'am. He's fed the poor and lifted up the afflicted, and he's watched with us beside our sick and prayed with us over our dead. We know him, no matter what folks on the outside say. Well, we'll have to spur up a little, ma'am, for we're in a hurry to git back."

They approached the point where the road to the post branched.

"There's goin' to be fightin' over here if Chadron tries to drive us out," Tom said, "and we know he's sent for men to come in and help him try it. We don't want to fight, but men that won't fight for their homes ain't the kind you'd like to ride along the road with, ma'am."

"Maybe the trouble can be settled some other way," she suggested, thinking again of the hope that she had brought with her to the ranch the day before.

"When we bring the law in here, and elect officers to see it put in force for every man alike, then this trouble it'll come to an end. Well, if you ever feel like we deserve a good word, colonel's daughter, we'd be proud to have you say it, for the feller that stands up for the law and the Lord and his home agin the

cattlemen in this land, ma'am, he's got a hard row to hoe. Yes, we'll count any good words you might say for us as so much gold. 'And the Levite, thou shalt not forsake him, for he hath no part nor inheritance with thee.'"

Tom's voice was slow and solemn when he quoted that Mosaic injunction. The appeal of the disinherited was in it, and the pain of lost years. It touched her like a sorrow of her own. Tears were on her cheeks again as she parted from him, giving him her hand in token of trust and faith, and rode on toward the ranchhouse by the river.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN FRIENDS PART

BANJO had returned, with fever in his wound. Mrs. Chadron was putting horse liniment on it when Frances entered the sitting-room where the news of the tragedy had visited them the night past.

"I didn't go to the post — I saw some men in the road and turned back," Frances told them, sinking down wearily in a chair before the fire.

"I'm glad you turned back, honey," Mrs. Chadron said, shaking her head sadly, "for I was no end worried about you. Them rustlers they're comin' down from their settlement and gatherin' up by Macdonald's place, the men told Banjo, and no tellin' what they might 'a' done if they'd seen you."

Mrs. Chadron's face was not red with the glow of peppers and much food this morning. One night of anxiety had racked her, and left hollows under her eyes and a flat grayness in her cheeks.

Banjo had brought no other news. The men had scattered at daybreak to search for the trail of the man who had carried Nola away, but Banjo, sore and shaken, had come back depressed and full of pains. Mrs. Chadron said that Saul surely would be home before noonday, and urged Frances to go to her room and sleep.

"I'm steadier this morning, I'll watch and wait,"

she said, pressing the liniment-soaked cloth to Banjo's bruised forehead.

Banjo contracted his muscles under the application, shriveling up on himself like a snail in a fire, for it was hot and heroic liniment, and strong medicine for strong beasts and tougher men. Banjo's face was a picture of patient suffering, but he said nothing, and had not spoken since Frances entered the room, for the treatment had been under way before her arrival and there was scarcely enough breath left in him to suffice for life, and none at all for words. Frances had it in mind to suggest some milder remedy, but held her peace, feeling that if Banjo survived the treatment he surely would be in no danger from his hurt.

The door of Nola's room was open as Frances passed, and there was a depression in the counterpane which told where the lost girl's mother had knelt beside it and wet it with her tears. Frances wondered whether she had prayed, lingering compassionately a moment in the door.

The place was like Nola in its light and brightness and surface comfort and assertive color notes of happiness, hung about with the trophies of her short but victorious career among the hearts of men. There were photographs of youths on dressing-table, chiffonier, and walls, and flaring pennants of eastern universities and colleges. Among the latter, as if it was the most triumphant trophy of them all, there hung a little highland bonnet with a broken feather,

of the plaid Alan Macdonald had worn on the night of Nola's mask.

Frances went in for a nearer inspection, and lifted the little saucy bit of headgear from its place in the decorations of Nola's wall. There could be no doubting it; that was Alan Macdonald's bonnet, and there was a bullet hole in it at the stem of the little feather. The close-grazing lead had sheared the plume in two, and gone on its stinging way straight through the bonnet.

An exclamation of tender pity rose above her breath. She fondled the little headdress and pressed it to her bosom; she laid it against her cheek and kissed it in consolation for its hurt — the woman's balsam for all sufferings and heartbreaks, and incomparable among the panaceas of all time.

In spite of her sympathy for Nola in her grave situation, facing or undergoing what terrors no one knew, there was a bridling of resentment against her in Frances' breast as she hung the marred bonnet back in its place. It seemed to her that Nola had exulted over both herself and Alan Macdonald when she had put his bonnet on her wall, and that she had kept it there after the coming of Frances to that house in affront to friendship and mockery of the hospitality that she professed to extend.

Nola had asked her to that house so that she might see it hanging there; she had arranged it and studied it with the cunning intent of giving her pain. And how close that bullet had come to him!

It must have sheared his fair hair as it tore through and dashed the bonnet from his head.

How she suffered in picturing his peril, happily outlived! how her heart trembled and her strong young limbs shook as she lived over in breathless agony the crisis of that night! He had carried her glove in his bonnet — she remembered the deft little movement of stowing it there just the moment before he bent and flashed away among the shadows. Excuse enough for losing it, indeed!

But he had not told her of his escape to justify the loss; proudly he had accepted the blame, and turned away with the hurt of it in his unbending heart.

She went back and took down the jaunty little cap again, and kissed it with compensatory tenderness, and left a jewel trembling on its crown from the well of her honest brown eye. If ever amends were made to any little highland bonnet in this world, then Alan Macdonald's was that bonnet, hanging there among the flaring pennants and trivial little schoolgirl trophies on Nola Chadron's wall.

Chadron came home toward evening at the head of sixty men. He had raised his army speedily and effectively. These men had been gathered by the members of the Drovers' Association and sent to Meander by special train, horses, guns, ammunition, and provisions with them, ready for a campaign.

The cattlemen had made a common cause of this sectional difficulty. Their indignation had been

voiced very thoroughly by Mrs. Chadron when she had spoken to Frances with such resentment of the homesteaders standing up to fight. That was an unprecedented contingency. The "holy scare," such as Mark Thorn and similar hired assassins spread in communities of homesteaders, had been sufficient up to that day. Now this organized front of self-defense must be broken, and the bold rascals involved must be destroyed, root and branch.

Press agents of the Drovers' Association in Cheyenne were sowing nation-wide picturesque stories of the rustlers' uprising. The ground was being prepared for the graver news that was to come; the cattlemen's justification was being carefully arranged in advance.

Frances shuddered for the homesteaders when she looked out of her window upon this formidable force of lean-legged, gaunt-cheeked gun-fighters. They were men of the trade, cowboys who had fought their employers' battles from the Rio Grande to the Little Missouri. They were grim and silent men as they pressed round the watering troughs at the windmill with their horses, with flapping hats and low-slung pistols, and rifles sheathed in leather cases on their saddles.

She hurried down when she saw Chadron dismount at the gate. Mrs. Chadron was there to meet him, for she had stood guard at her window all day watching for his dust beyond the farthest hill. Frances could hear her weeping now, and Chadron's

heavy voice rising in command as she came to the outer door.

Chadron was in the saddle again, and there was hurrying among his men at barn and corral as they put on bridles which they had jerked off, and tightened girths and gathered up dangling straps. Chadron was riding among them, large and commanding as a general, with a cloud in his dark face that seemed a threat of death.

Mrs. Chadron was hurrying in to make a bundle of some heavy clothing for Nola to protect her against the night chill on her way home, which the confident soul believed her daughter would be headed upon before midnight. Saul the invincible was taking the trail; Saul, who smashed his way to his desires in all things. She gave Frances a hurried word of encouragement as they passed outside the door.

Chadron was talking earnestly to his men. "I'll give fifty dollars bonus to the man that brings him down," she heard him say as she drew near, "and a hundred to the first man to lay eyes on my daughter."

Frances was hurrying to him with the information that she had kept for his ear alone. She was flushed with excitement as she came among the rough horsemen like a bright bloom tossed among rusty weeds. They fell back generously, not so much to give her room as to see her to better advantage, passing winks and grimaces of approval between themselves in their free and easy way. Chadron gave his

hand in greeting as she spoke some hasty words of comfort.

"Thank you, Miss Frances, for your friendship in this bad business," he said, heartily, and with the best that there was in him. "You've been a great help and comfort to her mother, and if it wouldn't be askin' too much I'd like for you to stay here with her till we bring my little girl back home."

"Yes, I intended to stay, Mr. Chadron; I didn't come out to tell you that." She looked round at the admiring faces, too plainly expressive of their approbation, some of them, and plucked Chadron's sleeve. "Bend down — I want to tell you something," she said, in low, quick voice.

Chadron stooped, his hand lightly on her shoulder, in attitude of paternal benediction.

"It wasn't Macdonald, it was Mark Thorn," she whispered.

Chadron's face displayed no surprise, shadowed no deeper concern. Only there was a flitting look of perplexity in it as he sat upright in his saddle again.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"Don't you know?" She watched him closely, baffled by his unmoved countenance.

"I never heard of anybody in this country by that name," he returned, shaking his head with a show of entire sincerity. "Who was tellin' you about him — who said he was the man?"

A little confused, and more than a little disap-

pointed over the apparent failure of her news to surprise from Chadron a betrayal of his guilty connection with Mark Thorn, she related the adventure of the morning, the finding of the cap, the meeting with Macdonald and his neighbors. She reserved nothing but what Lassiter had told her of Thorn's employers and his bloody work in that valley.

Chadron shook his head with an air of serious concern. There was a look of commiseration in his eyes for her credulity, and shameful duping by the cunning word of Alan Macdonald.

"That's one of Macdonald's lies," he said, something so hard and bitter in his voice when he pronounced that name that she shuddered. "I never heard of anybody named Thorn, here or anywheres else. That rustler captain he's a deep one, Miss Frances, and he was only throwin' dust in your eyes. But I'm glad you told me."

"But they said — the man he called Lassiter said — that Macdonald would find Nola, and bring her home," she persisted, unwilling yet to accept Chadron's word against that old man's, remembering the paper with the list of names.

"He's bald-faced enough to try even a trick like that!" he said.

Chadron looked impatiently toward the house, muttering something about the slowness of "them women," avoiding Frances' eyes. For she did not believe Saul Chadron, and her distrust was eloquent in her face.

"You mean that he'd pretend a rescue and bring her back, just to make sympathy for himself and his side of this trouble?"

"That's about the size of it," Chadron nodded, frowning sternly.

"Oh, it seems impossible that anybody could be so heartless and low!"

"A man that'd burn brands is low enough to go past anything you could imagine in that little head of yours, Miss Frances. Do you mind runnin' in and tellin'—no, here she comes."

"Couldn't this trouble between you and the homesteaders—"

"Homesteaders! They're cattle thieves, born in 'em and bred in 'em, and set in the hide and hair of 'em!"

"Couldn't it be settled without all this fighting and killing?" she went on, pressing her point.

"It's all over now but the shoutin'," said he. "There's only one way to handle a rustler, Miss Frances, and that's to salt his hide."

"I'd be willing—I'd be glad—to go up there myself, alone, and take any message you might send," she offered. "I think they'd listen to reason, even to leaving the country if you want them to, rather than try to stand against a ga—force like this."

"You can't understand our side of it, Miss Frances,"—Chadron spoke impatiently, reaching out for the bundle that his wife was bringing while she was yet two rods away—"for you ain't been

robbed and wronged by them nesters like we have. You've got to live it to know what it means, little lady. We've argued with 'em till we've used up all our words, but their fences is still there. Now we're goin' to clear 'em out."

"But Macdonald seemed hurt when I asked him how much money they wanted you to pay as Nola's ransom," she said.

"He's deep, and he's tricky — too deep and too slick for you." Chadron gathered up his reins, leaned over and whispered: "Don't say anything about that Thorn yarn to her" — a sideways jerk of the head toward his wife — "her trouble's deep enough without stirrin' it."

Chadron had the bundle now, and Mrs. Chadron was helping him tie it behind his saddle, shaking her head sadly as she handled the belongings of her child with gentle touch. Tears were running down her cheeks, but her usually ready words seemed dead upon her tongue.

From the direction of the barn a little commotion moved forward among the horsemen, like a wave before a breeze. Banjo Gibson appeared on his horse as the last thong was tied about Nola's bundle, his hat tilted more than its custom to spare the sore place over his eye.

The cowboys looked at his gaudy trappings with curious eyes. Chadron gave him a short word of greeting, and bent to kiss his wife good-bye.

"I'm with you in this here thing, Saul," said

Banjo; "I'll ride to hell's back door to help you find that little girl!"

Chadron slewed in his saddle with an ugly scowl.

"We don't want any banjo-pickers on this job, it's men's work!" he said.

Banjo seemed to droop with humiliation. Chuckles and derisive words were heard among Chadron's train. The little musician hung his bandaged head.

"Oh, you ortn't be hard on Banjo, he means well," Mrs. Chadron pleaded.

"He can stay here and scratch the pigs," Chadron returned, in his brutal way. "We've got to go now, old lady, but we'll be back before morning, and we'll bring Nola. Don't you worry any more; she'll be all right—they wouldn't dare to harm a hair of her head."

Mrs. Chadron looked at him with large hope and larger trust in her yearning face, and Banjo slewed his horse directly across the gate.

"Before you leave, Saul, I want to tell you this," he said. "You've hurt me, and you've hurt me *deep!* I'll leave here before another hour passes by, and I'll never set a boot-heel inside of your door ag'in as long as you live!"

"Oh hell!" said Chadron, spurring forward into the road.

Chadron's men rode away after him, except five whom he detailed to stay behind and guard the ranch. These turned their horses into the corral, made their little fire of twigs and gleaned brush

in their manner of wood-scant frugality, and over it cooked their simple dinner, each man after his own way.

Banjo led his horse to the gate in front of the house and left it standing there while he went in to get his instruments. Mrs. Chadron was moved to a fresh outburst of weeping by his preparations for departure, and the sad, hurt look in his simple face.

"You stay here, Banjo; don't you go!" she begged. "Saul he didn't mean any harm by what he said—he won't remember nothing about it when he comes back."

"I'll remember it," Banjo told her, shaking his head in unbending determination, "and I couldn't be easy here like I was in the past. If I was to try to swaller a bite of Saul Chadron's grub after this it'd stick in my throat and choke me. No, I'm a-goin', mom, but I'm carryin' away kind thoughts of you in my breast, never to be forgot."

Banjo hitched the shoulder strap of the instrument from which he took his name with a jerking of the shoulder, and settled it in place; he took up his fiddle box and hooked it under his arm, and offered Mrs. Chadron his hand. She was crying, her face in her apron, and did not see. Frances took the extended hand and clasped it warmly, for the little musician and his homely small sentiments had found a place in her heart.

"You shouldn't leave until your head gets better,"

she said; "you're hardly able to take another long ride after being in the saddle all night, hurt like you are."

Banjo looked at her with pain reflected in his shallow eyes.

"The hurt that gives me my misery is where it can't be seen," he said.

"Where are you goin', Banjo, with the country riled up this way, and you li'ble to be shot down any place by them rustlers?" Mrs. Chadron asked, looking at him appealingly, her apron ready to stem her gushing tears.

"I'll go over to the mission and stay with Mother Mathews till I'm healed up. I'll be welcome in that house; I'd be welcome there if I was blind, and had m' back broke and couldn't touch a string."

"Yes, you would, Banjo," Mrs. Chadron nodded.

"She's married to a Injun, but she's as white as a angel's robe."

"She's a good soul, Banjo, as good as ever lived."

Frances took advantage of Banjo's trip to the reservation to send a note to her father apprising him of the tragedy at the ranch. Banjo buttoned it inside his coat, mounted his horse, and rode away.

Mrs. Chadron watched him out of sight with lamentations.

"I wish he'd 'a' stayed—it 'd 'a' been all right with Saul; Saul didn't mean any harm by what he said. He's the tender-heartedest man you ever saw, he wouldn't hurt a body's feelin's for a farm."

"I don't believe Banjo is a man to hold a grudge very long," Frances told her, looking after the retreating musician, her thoughts on him but hazily, but rather on a little highland bonnet with a bullet hole in its crown.

"No, he ain't," Mrs. Chadron agreed, plucking up a little brightness. "But it's a bad sign, a mighty bad sign, when a friend parts from you with a hurt in his heart that way, and leaves your house in a huff and feels put out like Banjo does."

"Yes," said Frances, "we let them go away from us too often that way, with sore hearts that even a little word might ease."

She spoke with such wistful regret that the older woman felt its note through her own deep gloom. She groped out, tears blinding her, until her hand found her young friend's, and then she clasped it, and stood holding it, no words between them.

CHAPTER XV

ONE ROAD

TWENTY-FOUR hours after Banjo's departure a messenger arrived at the ranchhouse. It was one of the cowboys attached to the ranch, and he came with his right arm in a sling. He was worn and beaten out by long hours in the saddle and the pain of his wound.

He said they had news of Nola, and that Chadron sent word that she would be home before another night passed. This intelligence sent Mrs. Chadron off to bedroom and kitchen to make preparations for her reception and restoration.

As she left the room Frances turned to the messenger, who stood swinging his big hat awkwardly by the brim. She untied the sling that held his wounded arm and made him sit by the table while she examined his injury, concerning which Mrs. Chadron, in her excitement, had not even inquired.

The shot had gone through the forearm, grazing the bone. When Frances, with the aid of Maggie, the Mexican woman with tender eyes, had cleansed and bound up the wound, she turned to him with a decisive air of demand.

"Now, tell me the truth," she said.

He was a bashful man, with a long, sheepish nose

and the bluest of harmless eyes. He started a little when she made that demand, and blushed.

"That's what the boss told me to say," he demurred.

"I know he did; but what's happening?"

"Well, we ain't heard hide nor hair of her"—he looked round cautiously, lest Mrs. Chadron surprise him in the truth—"and them rustlers they're clean gone and took everything but their houses and fences along—beds and teams and stock, and everything."

"Gone!" she repeated, staring at him blankly; "where have they gone?"

"Macdonald's doin' it; that man's got *brainds*," the cowboy yielded, with what he knew to be unlawful admiration of the enemy's parts. "He's herdin' 'em back in the hills where they've built a regular fort, they say. Some of us fellers caught up to a few of the stragglers last night, and that's when I got this arm put on me."

"Have any of the rustlers been killed?"

"No," he admitted, disgustedly, "they ain't! We've burnt all the shacks we come to, and cut their fences, but they all got slick and clean away, down to the littlest kid. But the boss's after 'em," he added, with brisk hopefulness, "and you'll have better news by mornin'."

Chadron himself was the next rider to arrive at that anxious house, and he came as the messenger of disaster. He arrived between midnight and morning, his horse spur-gashed, driven to the limit, himself

sunken-eyed from his anxiety and hard pursuit of his elusive enemy.

Mrs. Chadron was asleep when he entered the living-room where Frances was keeping lonely watch before the chimney fire.

"What's happened?" she asked, hastening to meet him.

Chadron stood there gray and dusty, his big hat down hard on his head, his black eyes shooting inquiry into the shadowed room.

"Where is she?" he whispered.

"Upstairs, asleep — I've only just been able to persuade her to lie down and close her eyes."

"Well, there's no use to wake her up for bad news."

"You haven't found Nola?"

"I know right where she is. I could put my hand on her if I could reach her."

"Then why — ?"

"Hell!" said Chadron, bursting into a fire of passion, "why can't I fly like an eagle? Young woman, I've got to tell you I've been beat and tricked for the first time in my life! They've got my men hemmed in, I tell you — they've got 'em shut up in a cañon as tight as if they was nailed in their coffins!"

If Chadron had been clearer of sight and mind in that moment of his towering anger, he would have seen her cheeks flush at his words, and her nostrils dilate and her breath come faster. But he was blind;

his little varnish of delicacy was gone. He was just a ranting, roaring, dark-visaged brute with murder in his heart.

"That damned Macdonald done it, led 'em into it like they was blind! He's a wolf, and he's got the tricks of a wolf, he skulked ahead of 'em with a little pack of his rustlers and led 'em into his trap, then the men he had hid there and ready they popped up as thick as grass. They've got fifty of my men shut up there where they can't git to water, and where they can't fight back. Now, what do you think of that?"

"I'll tell you what I think," she said, throwing up her head, her eyes as quick and bright as water in the sun, "I think it's the judgment of God! I glory in the trick Alan Macdonald played you, and I pray God he can shut your hired murderers there till the last red-handed devil dies of thirst!"

Chadron fell back from her a step, his eyes staring, his mouth open, his hand lifted as if to silence her. He stood so a moment, casting his wild look around, fearful that somebody else had heard her passionate denunciation.

"What in the hell do you mean?" he asked, crouching as he spoke, his teeth clenched, his voice smothered in his throat.

"I mean that I know you're a murderer — and worse! You hired those men, like you hired Mark Thorn, to come here and murder those innocent men and their families!"

"Well, what if I did?" he said, standing straight again, his composure returning. "They're thieves; they've been livin' off of my cattle for years. Anybody's got a right to kill a rustler — that's the only cure. Well, they'll not pen them men of mine up there till they crack for water, I'll bet you a purty on that! I'm goin' after soldiers, and this time I'll git 'em, too."

"Soldiers!" said she, in amazement. "Will you ask the United States government to march troops here to save your hired assassins? Well, you'll not get troops — if there's anything that I can say against you to keep you from it!"

"You keep out of it, my little lady; you ain't got no call to mix up with a bunch of brand-burnin' thieves!"

"They're not thieves, and you know it! Macdonald never stole an animal from you or anybody else; none of the others ever did."

"What do you know about it?" sharply.

"I know it, as well as I know what's in your mind about the troops. You'll go over father's head to get them. Well, by the time he wires to the department the facts I'm going to lay before him, I'd like to see the color of the trooper you'll get!"

"You'll keep your mouth shut, and hold your finger out of this pie before you git it burnt!"

"I'll not keep my mouth shut!" She began moving about the room, picking up her belongings. "I'm going to saddle my horse and go to the post right

now, and the facts of your bloody business will be in Washington before morning."

"You're not goin'—to the—post!" Chadron's words were slow and hard. He stood with his back to the door. "This house was opened to you as a friend, not as a traitor and a spy. You're not goin' to put your foot outside of it into any business of mine, no matter which way you lean."

All day she had been dressed ready to mount and ride in any emergency, her hat, gloves and quirt on the table before the fireplace. In that sober habit she appeared smaller and less stately, and Saul Chadron, with his heavy shoulders against the closed door, towered above her, dark and angrily determined.

"I'm going to get my horse," said she, standing before him, waiting for him to quit the door.

"You're goin' to stay right in this house, there's where you're goin' to stay; and you'll stay till I've cleaned out Macdonald and his gang, down to the last muddy-bellied wolf!"

"You'll answer for detaining me here, sir!"

"There ain't no man in this country that I answer to!" returned Chadron, not without dignity, for power undisputed for so long, and in such large affairs, had given him a certain manner of imperialism.

"You'll find out where your mistake is, to your bitter cost, before many days have gone over your head. Your master is on the way; you'll meet him yet."

"You might as well ca'm down, and take that hat off and make yourself easy, Miss Frances; you ain't goin' to the post tonight."

"Open that door, Mr. Chadron! For the memory of your daughter, be a man!"

"I'm actin' for the best, Miss Frances." Chadron softened in speech, but unbent in will. "You must stay here till we settle them fellers. I ain't got time to bring any more men up from Cheyenne — I've got to have help within the next twenty-four hours. You can see how your misplaced feelin's might muddle and delay me, and hold off the troopers till they've killed off all of my men in that cañon back yonder in the hills. It's for the best, I tell you; you'll see it that way before daylight."

"It's a pity about your gallant cutthroats! It's time the rest of this country knew something about the methods of you cattlemen up here, and the way you harass and hound and murder honest men that are trying to make homes!"

"Oh, Miss Frances! ca'm down, ca'm down!" coaxed Chadron, spreading his hands in conciliatory gesture, as if to smooth her troubled spirits, and calm her down by stroking her, like a cat.

"Now you want to call out the army to rescue that pack of villains, you want to enlist the government to help you murder more children! Well, I'm a daughter of the army; I'm not going to stand around and see you pull it down to any such business as yours!"

"You'd better make up your mind to take it easy, now, Miss Frances. Put down your hat and things, now, and run along off to bed like a good little girl."

She turned from him with a disdainful toss of the head, and walked across to the window where Mrs. Chadron's great chair stood beside her table.

"Do you want it known that I was forced to leave your house by the window?" she asked, her hand on the sash.

"It won't do you any good if you do," Chadron growled, turning and throwing the door open with gruff decision. He stood a moment glowering at her, his shoulders thrust into the room. "You can't leave here till I'm ready for you to go — I'm goin' to put my men on the watch for you. If you try it afoot they'll fetch you back, and if you git stubborn and try to ride off from 'em, they'll shoot your horse. You take my word that I mean it, and set down and be good."

He closed the door. She heard his heavy tread, careless, it seemed, whether he broke the troubled sleep of his wife, pass out by way of the kitchen. She returned to the fire, surging with the outrage of it, and sat down to consider the situation.

There was no doubt that Chadron meant what he had said. This was only a mild proceeding to suppress evidence compared to his usual methods, as witnessed by the importation of Mark Thorn, and now his wholesale attempt with this army of hired gunslingers. But above the anger and indignation there

was the exultant thought of Macdonald's triumph over the oppressor of the land. It glowed like a bright light in the turmoil of her present hour.

She had told Chadron that his master was on the way, and she had seen him swell with the cloud of anger that shrouded his black heart. And she knew that he feared that swift-footed man Macdonald, who had outgeneraled him and crippled him before he had struck a blow. Well, let him have his brutal way until morning; then she would prevail on Mrs. Chadron to rescind his order and let her go home.

There being nothing more to be hoped or dreaded in the way of news that night, Frances suppressed her wrath and went upstairs and to bed. But not to sleep; only to lie there with her hot cheeks burning like fever, her hot heart triumphing in the complete confidence and justification of Macdonald that Chadron's desperate act had established. She glowed with inner warmth as she told herself that there would be no more doubting, no more swaying before the wind of her inclination. Her heart had read him truly that night in the garden close.

She heard Chadron ride away as she watched there for the dawn, and saw the cowboy guard that he had established rouse themselves while the east was only palely light and kindle their little fires. Soon the scent of their coffee and bacon came through her open window. Then she rose and dressed herself in her saddle garb again, and went tiptoeing past Mrs. Chadron's door.

Since going to bed Mrs. Chadron had not stirred. She seemed to have plunged over the precipice of sleep and to be lying stunned at the bottom. Frances felt that there was no necessity for waking her out of that much-needed repose, for the plan that she had formulated within the past few minutes did not include an appeal for Mrs. Chadron's assistance in it.

Experience told her that Mrs. Chadron would accept unquestioningly the arrangements and orders of her husband, in whom her faith was boundless and her confidence without bottom. She would advance a hundred tearful pleas to take the edge off Frances' indignant anger, and weep and implore, but ten to one remain as steadfast as a ledge in her fealty to Saul. So Frances was preparing to proceed without her help or hindrance.

She went softly into the room where she had faced Chadron a few hours before, and crossed to the fireplace, where the last coals of the fire that had kept her company were red among the ashes. It was dark yet, only a little grayness, like murky water, showing under the rim of the east, but she knew where the antlers hung above the mantel, with the rifle in its case, and the two revolvers which Alvino had brought to his mistress from the wounded foreman in the bunkhouse.

But the antlers were empty. She felt them over with contracting heart, then struck a match to make sure. The guns were gone. Saul Chadron had re-

moved them, foreseeing that they might stand her in the place of a friend.

She lit a lamp and began a search of the lower part of the house for arms. There was not a single piece left in any of the places where they commonly were a familiar sight. Even the shotgun was gone from over the kitchen door. She returned to the sitting-room and laid some sticks on the coals, and sat leaning toward the blaze in that sense of comradeship that is as old between man and fire as the servitude of that captive element.

Her elbows were on her knees, and her gloved hands were clasped, and the merry little fire laughed up into her fixed and thoughtful eyes.

Fire has but one mood, no matter what it cheers or destroys. It always laughs. There is no melancholy note in it, no drab, dull color of death such as the flood comes tainted with. Even while it eats away our homes and possessions, it has a certain comfort in its touch and glow if we stand far enough away.

Dawn broadened; the watery light came in like cold. Frances got up, shivering a little at the unfriendly look of the morning. She thought she heard a cautious foot stealing away from the window, and turned from it with contemptuous recollection of Chadron's threat to set spies over her.

Frances left the house with no caution to conceal her movements, and went to the barn. Alvino was hobbling about among the horses with his lantern.

He gave her an open and guileless good-morning, and she told him to saddle her horse.

She was determined to ride boldly out of the gate and away, hardly convinced that even those seasoned ruffians would take a chance of hitting her by firing at her horse. None of the imported shooters was in sight as she mounted before the barn door, but two of them lounged casually at the gate as she approached.

"Where was you aimin' to go so early?" asked one of them, laying hand on her bridle.

"I'm the daughter of Colonel Landcraft, commanding officer at Fort Shakie, and I'm going home," she answered, as placidly and good-humoredly as if it might be his regular business to inquire.

"I'm sorry to have to edge in on your plans, sissy," the fellow returned, familiarly, "but nobody goes away from this ranch for some little time to come. That's the boss's orders. Don't you know them rustlers is shootin' up the country ever' which way all around here? Shucks! It ain't safe for no lady to go skylarkin' around in."

"They wouldn't hurt me — they know there's a regiment of cavalry at the post standing up for me."

"I don't reckon them rustlers cares much more about them troopers than we do, sis."

"Will you please open the gate?"

"I hate to refuse a lady, but I dasn't do it." He shook his head in exaggerated gravity, and his companion covered a sputtering laugh with his hand.

Frances felt her resolution to keep her temper dissolving. She shifted her quirt as the quick desire to strike him down and ride over his ugly grinning face flashed through her. But the wooden stock was light under the braided leather; she knew that she could not have knocked a grunt out of the tough rascal who barred her way with his insolent leer in his mean squint eyes. He was a man who had nothing to lose, therefore nothing to fear.

"If it's dangerous for me to go alone, get your horse and come with me. I'll see that you get more out of it than you make working for Chadron."

The fellow squinted up at her with eyes half-shut, in an expression of cunning.

"Now you trot along back and behave you'self, before I have to take you down and spank you," he said.

The other three men of the ranch guard came waddling up in that slouching gait of saddle-men, cigarettes dangling from their lips. Frances saw that she would not be allowed to pass that way. But they were all at that spot; none of them could be watching the back gate. She wheeled her long-legged cavalry horse to make a dash for it, and came face to face with Mrs. Chadron, who was hurrying from the house with excited gesticulations, pointing up the road.

"Somebody's comin', it looks like one of the boys, I saw him from the upstairs winder!" she announced. "Where was you goin', honey?"

"I was starting home, Mrs. Chadron, but these men——"

"There he comes!" cried Mrs. Chadron, hastening to the gate.

A horseman had come around the last brush-screened turn of the road, and was drawing near. Frances felt her heart leap like a hare, and a delicious feeling of triumph mingle with the great pride that swept through her in a warm flood. Tears were in her eyes, half-blinding her; a sob of gladness rose in her breast and burst forth a little happy cry.

For that was Alan Macdonald coming forward on his weary horse, bearing something in his arms wrapped in a blanket, out of which a shower of long hair fell in bright cascade over his arm.

Mrs. Chadron pressed her lips tight. Neither cry nor groan came out of them as she stood steadying herself by a straining grip on the gate, watching Macdonald's approach. None of them knew whether the burden that he bore was living or dead; none of them in the group at the gate but Frances knew the rider's face.

One of the cowboys opened the gate wide, without a word, to let him enter. Mrs. Chadron lifted her arms appealingly, and hurried to his side as he stopped. Stiffly he leaned over, his inert burden held tenderly, and lowered what he bore into Mrs. Chadron's outstretched arms.

With that change of position there was a sharp movement in the muffling blanket, two arms reached

up with the quick clutching of a falling child, and clasped him about the neck. Then a sharp cry of waking recognition, and Nola was sobbing on her mother's breast.

Alan Macdonald said no word. The light of the sunrise was strong on his face, set in the suffering of great weariness; the stiffness of his long and burdened ride was in his limbs. He turned his dusty horse, with its head low-drooping, and rode out the way that he had come. No hand was lifted to stop him, no voice raised in either benediction or curse.

Mrs. Chadron was soothing her daughter, who was incoherent in the joy of her delivery, holding her clasped in her arms. Beyond that bright head there was no world for that mother then; save for the words which she crooned in the child's ears there was no message in her soul.

Frances felt tears streaking her face in hot rivulets as she sat in her saddle, struck inactive by the great admiration, the boundless pride, that this unselfish deed woke in her. She never had, in her life of joyousness, experienced such a high sense of human admiration before.

The cowboy who had opened the gate still held it so, the spell of Macdonald's dramatic arrival still over him. With his comrades he stood speechless, gazing after the departing horseman.

Frances touched her horse lightly and rode after him. Mother and daughter were so estranged from all the world in that happy moment of reunion that

neither saw her go, and the guards at the gate, either forgetful of their charge or softened by the moving scene, did not interpose to stop her.

Macdonald raised his drooping head with quick start as she came dashing to his side. She was weeping, and she put out her hand with a motion of entreaty, her voice thick with sobs.

"I wronged you and slandered you," she said, in bitter confession, "and I let you go when I should have spoken! I'm not worthy to ride along this road with you, Alan Macdonald, but I need your protection, I need your help. Will you let me go?"

He checked his horse and looked across at her, a tender softening coming into his tired face.

"Why, God bless you! there's only one road in the world for you and me," said he. His hand met hers where it fluttered like a dove between them; his slow, translating smile woke in his eyes and spread like a sunbeam over his stern lips.

Behind them Mrs. Chadron was calling. Frances turned and waved her hand.

"Come back, Frances, come back here!" Mrs. Chadron's words came distinctly to them, for they were not more than a hundred yards from the gate, and there was a note of eagerness in them, almost a command. Both of them turned.

There was a commotion among the men at the gate, a hurrying and loud words. Nola was beckoning to Frances to return; now she called her name, with fearful entreaty.

"That's Chance Dalton with his arm in a sling," said Macdonald, looking at her curiously. "What's up?"

"Chadron has made them all believe that you stole Nola for the sole purpose of making a pretended rescue to win sympathy for your cause," she said. "Even Nola will believe it — maybe they've told her. Chadron has offered a reward of fifty dollars — a bonus, he called it, so maybe there is more — to the man that kills you! Come on — quick! I'll tell you as we go."

Macdonald's horse was refreshed in some measure by the diminishing of its burden, but the best that it could do was a tired, hard-jogging gallop. In a little while they rounded the screen of brush which hid them from the ranchhouse and from those who Frances knew would be their pursuers in a moment. Quickly she told him of her reason for wanting to go to the post, and Chadron's reason for desiring to hold her at the ranch.

Macdonald looked at her with new life in his weary eyes.

"We'll win now; you were the one recruit I lacked," he said.

"But they'll kill you — Mrs. Chadron can't hold them back — she doesn't want to hold them back — for she's full of Chadron's lies about you. Your horse is worn out — you can't outrun them."

"How many are there besides the five I saw?"

"Only Dalton, and he's supposed to be crippled."

"Oh, well," he said, easily, as if only five whole men and a cripple didn't amount to so much, taken all in the day's work.

"Your men up there need your leadership and advice. Take my horse and go; he can outrun them."

He looked at her admiringly, but with a little reproving shake of the head.

"There's neither mercy nor manhood in any man that rides in Saul Chadron's pay," he told her. "They'd overtake you on this old plug before you'd gone a mile. The one condition on which I part company with you is that you ride ahead, this instant, and that you put your horse through for all that's in him."

"And leave you to fight six of them!"

"Staying here would only put you in unnecessary danger. I ask you to go, and go at once."

"I'll not go!" She said it finally and emphatically.

Macdonald checked his horse; she held back her animal to the slow pace of his. Now he offered his hand, as in farewell.

"You can assure them at the post that we'll not fire on the soldiers — they can come in peace. Goodbye."

"I'm not going!" she persisted.

"They'll not consider you, Frances — they'll not hold their fire on your account. You're a rustler now, you're one of us."

"You said — there — was — only — one — road," she told him, her face turned away.

"It's that way, then, to the left — up that dry bed of Horsethief Cañon." He spoke with a lift of exultation, of pride, and more than pride. "Ride low — they're coming!"

CHAPTER XVI

DANGER AND DIGNITY

"DID you carry her that way all the way home?" Frances asked the question abruptly, like one throwing down some troublesome and heavy thing that he has labored gallantly to conceal. It was the first word that she had spoken since they had taken refuge from their close-pressing pursuers in the dug-out that some old-time homesteader had been driven away from by Chadron's cowboys.

Macdonald was keeping his horse back from the door with the barrel of his rifle, while he peered out cautiously again, perplexed to understand the reason why Dalton had not led his men against them in a charge.

"Not all the way, Frances. She rode behind me till she got so cold and sleepy I was afraid she'd fall off."

"Yes, I'll bet she put on half of it!" she said, spitefully. "She looked strong enough when you put her down there at the gate."

This unexpected little outburst of jealousy was pleasant to his ears. Above the trouble of that morning, and of the future which was charged with it to the blackness of complete obscuration, her warrant of affection was like a lifting sunbeam of hope.

"I can't figure out what Dalton and that gang

mean by this," said he, the present danger again pressing ahead of the present joy.

"I saw a man dodge behind that big rock across there a minute ago," she said.

"You keep back away from that door — don't lean over out of that corner!" he admonished, almost harshly. "If you get where you can see, you can be seen. Don't forget that."

He resumed his watch at the little hole that he had drilled beside the weight-bowed jamb of the door in the earth front of their refuge. She sat silent in her dark corner across from him, only now and then shaking her glove at the horses when one of them pricked up his ears and showed a desire to dodge out into the sunlight and pleasant grazing spread on the hillside.

It was cold and moldy in the dugout, and the timbers across the roof were bent under the weight of the earth. It looked unsafe, but there was only one place in it that a bullet could come through, and that was the open door. There was no way to shut that; the original battens of the homesteader lay under foot, broken apart and rotting.

"Well, it beats me!" said he, his eye to the peep-hole in the wall.

"If I'd keep one of the horses on this side it wouldn't crowd your corner so," she suggested.

"It would be better, only they'll cut loose at anything that passes the door. They'll show their hand before long." He enlarged the hole to admit his

rifle barrel. She watched him in silence. Which was just as well, for she had no words to express her admiration for his steadiness and courage under the trying pressure of that situation. Her confidence in him was so entire that she had no fear; it did not admit a question of their safe deliverance. With him at her side, this dangerous, grave matter seemed but a passing perplexity. She left it to him with the confidence and up-looking trust of a child.

While she understood the peril of their situation, fear, doubt, had no place in her mind. She was under the protection of Alan Macdonald, the infallible.

No matter what others may think of a man's infallibility, it is only a dangerous one who considers himself endowed with that more than human attribute. Macdonald did not share her ease of mind as he stood with his eye to the squint-hole that he had bored beside the rotting jamb.

"How did you find her? where was she?" she asked, her thoughts more on the marvel of Nola's return than her own present danger.

"I lost Thorn's trail that first day," he returned, "and then things began to get so hot for us up the valley that I had to drop the search and get those people back to safety ahead of Chadron's raid. Yesterday afternoon we caught a man trying to get through our lines and down into the valley. He was a half-breed trapper who lives up in the foothills, carrying a note down to Chadron. I've got that curious piece of writing around me somewhere — you

can read it when this blows by. Anyway, it was from Thorn, demanding ten thousand dollars in gold. He wanted it sent back by the messenger, and he prescribed some picturesque penalties in case of failure on Chadron's part."

"And then you found her?"

"I couldn't very well ask anybody else to go after her," he admitted, with a modest reticence that amounted almost to being ashamed. "After I made sure that we had Chadron's raiders cooped up where they couldn't get out, I went up and got her. Thorn wasn't there, nobody but the Indian woman, the 'breed's wife. She was the jailer — a regular wildcat of a woman."

That was all there was to be told, it seemed, as far as Macdonald was concerned. He had the hole in the wall — at which he had worked as he talked — to his liking now, and was squinting through it like a telescope.

"Nola wasn't afraid to come with you," she said, positively.

"She didn't appear to be, Frances."

"No; she *knew* she was safe, no matter how little she deserved any kindness at your hands. I know what she did — I know how she — how she — *struck* you in the face that time!"

"Oh," said he, as if reminded of a trifle that he had forgotten.

"Did she — put her arms around your neck that way *many* times while you were carrying her home?"

"She did *not!* Many times! why, she didn't do it even once."

"Oh, at the gate — I saw her!"

He said nothing for a little while, only stood with head bent, as if thinking it over.

"Well, she didn't get very far with it," he said, quite seriously. "Anyway, she was asleep then, and didn't know what she was doing. It was just the subconscious reaching up of a falling, or dreaming, child."

She was not a little amused, in a quick turn from her serious bent of jealousy, at his long and careful explanation of the incident. She laughed, and the little green cloud that had troubled her blew away on the gale of her mirth.

"Oh, well!" said she, from her deep corner across the bright oblong of the door, tossing it all away from her. "Do you think they'll go away and let us come out after a while?"

"I don't believe they've got any such intention. If it doesn't come to a fight before then, I believe we'll have to drive the horses out ahead of us after dark, and try to get away under the confusion. You should have gone on, Frances, when I told you."

The horses were growing restive, moving, stamping, snorting, and becoming quarrelsome together. Macdonald's little range animal had a viciousness in it, and would not make friends with the chestnut cavalry horse. It squealed and bit, and even tried to use its heels, at every friendly approach.

Macdonald feared that so much commotion might bring the shaky, rotten roof down on them. A hoof driven against one of the timbers which supported it might do the trick, and bring them to a worse end than would the waiting bullets of Dalton and his gang.

"I'll have to risk putting that horse of yours over on your side," he told her. "Stand ready to catch him, but don't lean a hair past the door."

He turned the horse and gave it a slap. As it crossed the bar of light falling through the door, a shot cracked among the rocks. The bullet knocked earth over him as it smacked in the facing of the door. The man who had fired had shot obliquely, there being no shelter directly in front, and that fact had saved the horse.

Macdonald peered through his loophole. He could not see the smoke, but he let them know that he was primed by answering the shot at random. The shot drew a volley, a bullet or two striking the rear wall of the cave.

After that they waited for what might come between then and night. They said little, for each was straining with unpleasant thoughts and anxieties, and put to constant watchfulness to keep the horses from slewing around into the line of fire. Every time a tail switched out into the streak of light a bullet came nipping in. Sometimes Macdonald let them go unanswered, and again he would spring up and drive away at the rocks which he knew sheltered them,

almost driven to the point of rushing out and trying to dislodge them by storm.

So the day wore by. They had been in the dugout since a little after sunrise. Sunset was pale on the hilltops beyond them when Macdonald, his strained and tired eyes to the loophole, saw Dalton and two of his men slipping from rock to rock, drawing nearer for what he expected to be the rush.

"Can you shoot?" he asked her, his mouth hot and dry as if his blood had turned to liquid fire.

"Yes, I can shoot," she answered, steadily.

He tossed one of his revolvers across to her, dimly seen now in the deepening gloom of the cave, and flung a handful of cartridges after it.

"They're closing in on us for the rush, and I'm going to try to stop them. Keep back there where you are, and hold your horse under cover as long as you hear me shooting. If I stop first, call Dalton and tell him who you are. I believe in that case he'll let you go."

"I'm going to help you," she said, rising resolutely. "When you — stop shooting — " she choked a little over the words, her voice caught in a dry little sob — "then I'll stop shooting, too!"

"Stay back there, Frances! Do you hear — stay back!"

Somebody was on the roof of the dugout; under his weight clods of earth fell, and then, with a soft breaking of rotten timber, a booted foot broke through. It was on Frances' side, and the fellow's

foot almost touched her saddle as her frightened horse plunged.

The man was tugging to drag his foot through the roof now, earth and broken timber showering down. Macdonald only glanced over his shoulder, as if leaving that trapped one to her. He was set for their charge in front. She raised her revolver to fire as the other leg broke through, and the fellow's body dropped into the enlarged hole. At that moment the men in front fired a volley through the gaping door. Frances saw the intruder drop to the ground, torn by the heavy bullets from his companions' guns.

The place was full of smoke, and the turmoil of the frightened horses, and the noise of quick shots from Macdonald's station across the door. She could not make anything out in the confusion as she turned from the dead man to face the door, only that Macdonald was not at his place at the loophole now.

She called him, but her voice was nothing in the sound of firing. A choking volume of smoke was packing the cave. She saw Macdonald's horse lower its head and dash out, with a whip of its tail like a defiance of her authority. Then in a moment everything was still out there, with a fearful suddenness.

She flung herself into the cloud of smoke that hung in the door, sobbing Macdonald's name; she stumbled into the fresh sweet air, almost blind in her anxiety, and the confusion of that quickly enacted scene, her head bent as if to run under the bullets which she expected.

She did not see how it happened, she did not know that he was there; but his arm was supporting her, his cool hand was on her forehead, stroking her face as if he had plucked her drowning from the sea.

"Where are they?" she asked, only to exclaim, and shrink closer to him at the sight of one lying a few rods away, in that sprawling limp posture of those who fall by violence.

"There were only four of them — there the other two go." He pointed down the little swale where the tall grass was still green. Macdonald's horse had fallen to grazing there, his master's perils and escapes all one to him now. It threw its head up and stood listening, trotted a little way and stopped, ears stiff, nostrils stretched.

"There's somebody coming," she said.

"Yes — Chadron and a fresh gang, maybe."

He sprang to the dugout door, where Frances' horse stood with its head out inquiringly.

"Jump up — quick!" he said, bringing the horse out. "Go this time, Frances; don't hang back a second more!"

"Never mind, Alan," she said, from the other side of the horse, "it's the cavalry — I guess they've come after me."

Major King was at the head of the detail of seven men which rode up, horses a lather of sweat. He threw himself from the saddle and hurried to Frances, his face full of the liveliest concern. Macdonald stepped around to meet him.

"Thank heaven! you're not hurt," the major said.

"No, but we thought we were in for another fight," she told him, offering him her hand in the gratefulness of her relief. He almost snatched it in his eagerness, and drew her toward him, and stood holding it in his haughty, proprietary way. "Mr. Macdonald—"

"The scoundrels heard us coming and ran—we got a glimpse of them down there. Chadron will have to answer for this outrage!" the major said.

"Major King, this is Mr. Macdonald," said she, firmly, breaking down the high manner in which the soldier persisted in overlooking and eliminating the homesteader.

Major King's face flushed; he drew back a hasty step as Macdonald offered his hand, in the frank and open manner of an equal man who raised no thought nor question on that point.

"Sir, I've been hearing of the gallant *rescue* that you made of another young lady this morning," he said, with sneering emphasis. "You are hardly the kind of a man I shake hands with!"

The troopers, sitting their blowing horses a rod away, made their saddles creak as they shifted to see this little dash of melodrama. Macdonald's face was swept by a sudden paleness, as if a sickness had come over him. He clenched his lean jaw hard; the firmness of his mouth was grimmer still as his hand dropped slowly to his side. Frances looked her indignation and censure into Major King's hot eyes.

"Mr. Macdonald has defended me like a gallant gentleman, sir! Those ruffians didn't run because they heard you coming, but because he faced them out here in the open, single-handed and alone, and drove them to their horses, Major King!"

The troopers were looking Macdonald over with favor. They had seen the evidence of his stand against Chadron's men.

"You're deceived in your estimation of the fellow, Miss Landcraft," the major returned, red to the eyes in his offended dignity. "I arrived at the ranch not an hour ago, detailed to escort you back to the post. Will you have the kindness to mount at once, please?"

He stepped forward to give her a hand into the saddle. But Macdonald was before him in that office, urged to it by the quick message of her eyes. From the saddle she leaned and gave him her warm, soft hand.

"Your men need you, Mr. Macdonald — go to them," she said. "My prayers for your success in this fight for the right will follow you."

Macdonald was standing bareheaded at her stirrup. Her hand lingered a moment in his, her eyes sounded the bottom of his soul. Major King, with his little uprising of dignity, was a very small matter in the homesteader's mind just then, although a minute past he had fought with himself to keep from twisting the arrogant officer's neck.

She fell in beside Major King, who was sitting

grim enough in his way now, in the saddle, and they rode away. Macdonald stood, hat in hand, the last sunbeams of that day over his fair tangled hair, the smoke of his conflict on his face, the tender light of a man's most sacred fire in his eyes.

CHAPTER XVII

BOOTS AND SADDLES

WHEN Major King delivered Frances — his punctilious military observance made her home-coming nothing less — to Colonel Landcraft, they found that grizzled warrior in an electrical state of excitement. He was moving in quick little charges, but with a certain grim system in all of them, between desk and bookcases, letter files, cabinets, and back to his desk again. He drew a document here, tucked one away there, slipped an elastic about others assembled on his desk, and clapped a sheaf of them in his pocket.

Major King saluted within the door.

"I have the honor to report the safe return of the detachment dispatched to Alamito Ranch for the convoy of Miss Landcraft," he said.

Colonel Landcraft returned the salute, and stood stiffly while his officer spoke.

"Very well, sir," said he. Then flinging away his official stiffness, he met Frances half-way as she ran to meet him, and enfolded her to his breast, just as if his dry old heart knew that she had come to him through perils.

Breathlessly she told him the story, leaving no word unsaid that would mount to the credit of Alan Macdonald. Colonel Landcraft was as hot as blaz-

ing straw over the matter. He swore that he would roast Saul Chadron's heart on his sword, and snatched that implement from the chair where it hung as he spoke, and buckled it on with trembling hand.

King interposed to tell him that Chadron was not at the ranch, and begged the colonel to delegate to him the office of avenger of this insult and hazard that Frances had suffered at the hands of his men. For a moment Colonel Landcraft held the young officer's eye with thankful expression of admiration, then he drew himself up as if in censure for wasted time, saluted, took a paper from his desk, and said with grave dignity:

"It must fall to you, Major King, to demand the reparation for this outrage that I shall not be here to enforce. I am ordered to Washington, sir, to make my appearance before the retiring board. The department has vested the command of this post in you, sir — here is the order. My soldiering days are at an end."

He handed the paper to Major King, with a salute. With a salute the young officer took it from his hand, an eager light in his eyes, a flush springing to his pale face. Frances clung to her father's arm, a little trembling moan on her lips as if she had received a mortal hurt.

"Never mind, never mind, dear heart," said the old man, a shake in his own voice. Frances, looking up with her great pity into his stern, set face, saw

a tear creeping down his cheek, toughened by the fires of thirty years' campaigns.

"I'll never soldier any more," he said, "the politicians have got me. They've been after me a long time, and they've got me. But there is one easement in my disgrace—"

"Don't speak of it on those terms, sir!" implored Major King, more a man than a soldier as he laid a consoling hand on the old man's arm.

"No, no!" said Frances, clinging to her father's hand.

Colonel Landcraft smiled, looking from one to the other of them, and a softness came into his face. He took Major King's hand and carried it to join Frances', and she, in her softness for her father, allowed it to remain in the young soldier's grasp.

"There is one gleam of joy in the sundown of my life," the colonel said, "and that is in seeing my daughter pledged to a soldier. I must live in the reflection of your achievements, if I live beyond this disgrace, sir."

"I will try to make them worthy of my mentor, sir," Major King returned.

Frances stood with bowed head, the major still holding her hand in his ardent grasp.

"It's a crushing blow, to come before the preferment in rank that I have been led to expect would be my retiring compensation!" The colonel turned from them sharply, as if in pain, and walked in marching stride across the room. Frances withdrew

her hand, with a little struggle, not softened by the appeal in the major's eyes.

"My poor wife is bowed under it," the colonel spoke as he marched back and forth. "She has hoped with me for some fitting reward for the years of service I have unselfishly given to my country, sir, for the surrender of my better self to the army. I'll never outlive it, I feel that I'll never outlive it!"

Colonel Landcraft had no thought apart from what he felt to be his hovering disgrace. He had forgotten his rage against Chadron, forgotten that his daughter had lived through a day as hazardous as any that he had experienced in the Apache campaigns, or in his bleak watches against the Sioux. He turned to her now, where she stood weeping softly with bowed head, the grime of the dugout on her habit, her hair, its bonds broken, straying over her face.

"I had counted pleasurably on seeing you two married," he said, "but something tells me I shall never come back from this journey, never resume command of this post." He turned back to his marching, stopped three or four paces along, turned sharply, a new light in his face. "Why shouldn't it be before I leave — tonight, within the hour?"

"Oh, father!" said Frances, in terrified voice, lifting her face in its tear-wet loveliness.

"I must make the train that leaves Meander at four o'clock tomorrow morning, I shall have to leave here within —" he flashed out his watch with his

quick, nervous hand — "within three-quarters of an hour. What do you say, Major King? Are you ready?"

"I have been ready at any time for two years," Major King replied, in trembling eagerness.

Frances was thrown into such a mental turmoil by the sudden proposal that she could not, at that moment, speak a further protest. She stood with white face, her heart seeming to shrivel, and fall away to laboring faintness. Colonel Landcraft was not considering her. He was thinking that he must have three hours' sleep in the hotel at Meander before the train left for Omaha.

"Then we shall have the wedding at once, just as you stand!" he declared. "We'll have the chaplain in and — go and tell your mother, child, and — oh, well, throw on another dress if you like."

Frances found her tongue as her danger of being married off in that hot and hasty manner grew imminent.

"I'm not going to marry Major King, father, now or at any future time," said she, speaking slowly, her words coming with coldness from her lips.

"Silence! you have nothing to say, nothing to do but obey!" Colonel Landcraft blazed up in sudden explosion, after his manner, and set his heel down hard on the floor, making his sword clank in its scabbard on his thigh.

"I have not had much to say," Frances admitted, bitterly, "but I am going to have a great deal to

say in this matter now. Both of you have gone ahead about this thing just as if I was irresponsible, both of you—"

"Hold your tongue, miss! I command you—hold your tongue!"

"It's the farthest thing from my heart to give you pain, or disappoint you in your calculations of me, father," she told him, her voice gathering power, her words speed, for she was a warrior like himself, only that her balance was not so easily overthrown; "but I am not going to marry Major King."

"Heaven and hell!" said Colonel Landcraft, stamping up and down.

"Heaven *or* hell," said she, "and not hell—if I can escape it."

"I'll not permit this insubordination in a member of my family!" roared the colonel, his face fiery, his rumpled eyebrows knitted in a scowl. "I'll have obedience, with good grace, and at once, or damn my soul, you'll leave my house!"

"Major King, if you are a gentleman, sir, you will relieve me of this unwelcome pressure to force me against my inclination. It is quite useless, sir, I tell you most earnestly. I would rather die than marry you—I would rather die!"

"Sir, I have no wish to coerce the lady"—Major King's voice shook, his words were low—"as she seems to have no preference for me, sir. Miss Landcraft perhaps has placed her heart somewhere else."

"She has no right to act with such treachery to

me and you, sir," the colonel said. "I'll not have it! Where else, sir — who?"

"Spare me the humiliation of informing you," begged Major King, with averted face, with sorrow in his voice.

"Oh, you slanderous coward!" Frances assailed him with scorn of word and look. Colonel Landcraft was shaking a trembling finger at her, his face thrust within a foot of her own.

"I'll not have it! you'll not — who is the fellow, who?"

"There is nothing to conceal, there is no humiliation on my part in speaking his name, but pride — the highest pride of my heart!"

She stood back from them a little, her lofty head thrown back, her face full of color now, the strength of defense of the man she loved in her brave brown eyes.

"Some low poltroon, some sneaking civilian —"

"He is a man, father — you have granted that. His name is —"

"Stop!" thundered the colonel. "Heaven and hell! Will you disgrace me by making public confession of your shame? Leave this room, before you drive me to send you from it with a curse!"

In her room Frances heard the horses come to the door to carry her father away. She had sat there, trembling and hot, sorry for his foolish rage, hurt by his narrow injustice. Yet she had no bitterness in her heart against him, for she believed that she

knew him best. When his passion had fallen he would come to her, lofty still, but ashamed, and they would put it behind them, as they had put other differences in the past.

Her mother had gone to him to share the last moments of his presence there, and to intercede for her. Now Frances listened, her hot cheek in her hand, her eyes burning, her heart surging in fevered stroke. There was a good deal of coming and going before the house; men came up and dismounted, others rode away. Watching, her face against the cool pane, she did not see her father leave. Yet he had not come to her, and the time for his going was past.

Her heart was sore and troubled at the thought that perhaps he had gone without the word of pacification between them. It was almost terrifying to her to think of that. She ran down the stairs and stood listening at his closed door.

That was not his voice, that heavy growl, that animal note. Saul Chadron's; no other. Her mother came in through the front door, weeping, and clasped Frances in her arms as she stood there, shadowy in the light of the dim hall lamp.

"He is gone!" she said.

Frances did not speak. But for the first time in her life a feeling of bitterness against her father for his hardness of heart and unbending way of injustice lifted itself in her breast. She led her mother to her own room, giving her such comfort as she could put into words.

"He said he never marched out to sure defeat before," Mrs. Landcraft told her. "I've seen him go many a time, Frances, but never with such a pain in my heart as tonight!"

And Saul Chadron was the man who had caused his going, Frances knew, a new illumination having come over the situation since hearing his voice in the colonel's office a few minutes past. Chadron had been at Meander, telegraphing to the cattlemen's servants in Washington all the time. He had demanded the colonel's recall, and the substitution of Major King, because he wanted a man in authority at the post whom he could use.

This favoritism of Chadron made her distrustful at once of Major King. There must be some scheming and plotting afoot. She went down and stood in the hall again, not even above bending to listen at the keyhole. Chadron was talking again. She felt that he must have been talking all the time that she had been away. It must be an unworthy cause that needed so much pleading, she thought.

"Well, he'll not shoot, I tell you, King; he's too smart for that. He'll have to be trapped into it. If you've got to have an excuse to fire on them — and I can't see where it comes in, King, damn my neck if I can — we've got to set a trap."

"Leave that to me," returned Major King, coldly.

"How much force are you authorized to use?"

"The order leaves that detail to me. 'Sufficient force to restore order,' it says."

"I think you ort to take a troop, at the least, King, and a cannon — maybe two."

"I don't think artillery will be necessary, sir."

"Well, I'll leave it to you, King, but I'd hate like hell to take you up there and have that feller lick you. You don't know him like I do. I tell you he'd lay on his back and fight like a catamount as long as he had a breath left in him."

"Can you locate them in the night?"

"I think we'd have to wait up there somewheres for daybreak. I'm not just sure which cañon they are in."

There was silence. Frances peeped through the keyhole, but could see nothing except thick smoke over bookcases and files.

"Well, we'll not want to dislodge them before daylight, anyway, said King.

"If Macdonald can back off without a fight, he'll do it," Chadron declared, "for he knows as well as you and I what it'd mean to fire on the troops. And I want you to git him, King, and make sure you've got him."

"It depends largely on whether the fellow can be provoked into firing on us, Chadron. You think he can be; so do I. But in case he doesn't, the best we can do will be to arrest him."

"What good would he be to me arrested, King? I tell you I want his scalp, and if you bring that feller out of there in a sack you'll come back a brigadier. I put you where you're at. Well, I can put

you higher just as easy. But the purty I want for my trouble is that feller's scalp."

There was the sound of somebody walking about, in quick, nervous strides. Frances knew that Major King had got up from his usurped place at the desk — place unworthily filled, this low intrigue with Chadron aside, she knew — and was strutting in the shadow of his promised glory.

"Leave it to me, Chadron; I've got my own account to square with that wolf of the range!"

A sharp little silence, in which Frances could picture Chadron looking at King in his covert, man-weighing way. Then Chadron went on:

"King, I've noticed now and then that you seemed to have a soft spot in your gizzard for that little girl of mine. Well, I'll throw her in to boot if you put this thing through right. Is it a go?"

"I'd hesitate to bargain for the young lady without her being a party to the business," King replied, whether from wisdom born of his recent experience, or through lack of interest in the proposal Frances could not read in his even, well-pitched voice.

"Oh, she'd jump at you like a bullfrog at red flannel," Chadron assured him. "I could put your uniform on a wooden man and marry him off to the best girl in seven states. They never think of lookin' under a soldier's vest."

"You flatter me, Mr. Chadron, and the uniform of the United States army," returned King, with barely covered contempt. "Suppose we allow events to

shape themselves in regard to Miss Chadron. She'll hardly be entertaining marriage notions yet — after her recent experience."

Chadron got up so quickly he overturned his chair.

"By God, sir! do you mean to intimate you wouldn't have her after what she's gone through? Well, I'll put a bullet through any man that says — "

"Oh, hold yourself in, Chadron; there's no call for this."

King's cold contempt would have been like a lash to a man of finer sensibilities than Saul Chadron. As it was, Frances could hear the heavy cattleman breathing like a mad bull.

"When you talk about my little girl, King, go as easy as if you was carryin' quicksilver in a dish. You told me she was all right a little while ago, and I tell you I don't like — "

"Miss Chadron was as bright as a redbird when I saw her this afternoon," King assured him, calmly. "She has suffered no harm at the hands of Macdonald and his outlaws."

"He'll dance in hell for that trick before the sun goes down on another day!"

"His big play for sympathy fell flat," said King, with a contemptuous laugh. "There wasn't much of a crowd on hand when he arrived at the ranch."

Silence. A little shifting of feet, a growl from Chadron, and a curse.

"But as for your proposal involving Miss Chadron, I am honored by it," said King.

"Any man would be!" Chadron declared.

"And we will just let it stand, waiting the lady's sanction."

That brightened Chadron up. He moved about, and there was a sound as if he had slapped the young officer on the back in pure comradeship and open admiration.

"What's your scheme for drawin' that feller into firin' on your men?" he asked.

"We'll talk it over as we go," said King.

A bugle lifted its sharp, electrifying note in the barracks.

"Boots and saddles!" Chadron said.

"Yes; we march at nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRAIL OF THE COFFEE

"YOU done right to come to the mission after me, for I'd ride to the gatepost of hell to turn a trick agin Saúl Chadron!"

Banjo's voice had a quaver of earnestness in it that needed no daylight to enforce. The pitchy night made a bobbing blur of him as he rode his quick-stepping little horse at Frances Landcraft's side.

"Yes, you owe him one," Frances admitted.

"And I'll pay him before mornin' or it won't be no fault of mine. That there little ten-cent-size major he'd 'a' stopped you if he'd 'a' known you was goin', don't you suppose?"

"I'm sure he would have, Mr. Gibson."

"Which?" said Banjo.

"Banjo," she corrected.

"Now, that sounds more comfortabler," he told her. "I didn't know for a minute who you meant, that name's gittin' to be a stranger to me."

"Well, we don't want a stranger along tonight," said she, seriously.

"You're right, we don't. That there horse you're ridin' he's a good one, as good as any in the cavalry, even if he ain't as tall. He was an outlaw till Missus Mathews tamed him down."

"How did she do it — not break him like a bronco-buster?"

"No, she done it like she tames Injuns and other folks, by gentle words and gentler hands. Some they'll tell you she's sunk down to the ways of Injuns, clean out of a white man's sight in the dirt and doin's of them dead-horse eatin' 'Rapahoes. But I know she ain't. She lets herself down on a level to reach 'em, and git her hands under 'em so she can lift 'em up, the same as she puts herself on my level when she wants to reach me, or your level, or anybody's level, mom."

"Her eyes and her soft ways tell you that, Banjo, as plain as any words."

"She's done ten times as much as that big-backed buffalo of a preacher she's married to ever done for his own people, or ever will. He's clim above 'em with his educated ways; the Injun's ironed out of that man. You can't reach down and help anybody up, mom, if you go along through this here world on stilts."

"Not very well, Banjo."

"You need both of your hands to hold your stilts, mom; you ain't got even a finger to spare for a low-down feller like me."

"You're not a low-down fellow, Banjo. Don't be calling yourself names."

"I was low-down enough to believe what they told me about Macdonald shootin' up Chance Dalton. I believed it till Missus Mathews give me the straight

of it. One of them Injun police fellers told her how that job was put up, and how it failed to work."

"A man named Lassiter told me about it."

They rode along in silence a long time after that. Then Banjo—

"Well, I hope we don't bust out onto them cavalry fellers too sudden and meet a flock of bullets. I'd never forgive the man that put a bullet through my fiddle."

"We'll go slowly, and keep listening; I can tell cavalry from cowboys as far as I can hear."

"I bet a purty you can, brought up with 'em like you was."

"They'll not be able to do anything before daylight, and when we overtake them we'll ride around and get ahead while they're waiting for morning. I don't know where the homesteaders are, but they'll be sending out scouts to locate them, and we can watch."

They were following the road that the cavalry had taken an hour in advance of them. Listening now, they rode on without words. Now and then a bush at the roadside flipped a stirrup, now and again Banjo's little horse snorted in short impatience, as if expressing its disapproval of this journey through the dark. Night was assertive in its heaviness, but communicative of its mysteries in its wild scents—the silent music of its hour.

There are those who, on walking in the night, can tell the hour by the smell, the taste, the elusive fine

aroma of the quiet air. Before midnight it is like a new-lit censer; in the small hours the smell of old camp fires comes trailing, and the scent of rain upon embers.

But Frances Landcraft was not afraid of the night as she rode silently through it with Banjo Gibson at her side. There was no shudder in it for her as there had been on the night that Nola was stolen; it could not have raised up a terror grim enough to turn her back upon the road.

Her one thought was that she must reach Macdonald before Chadron and King could find him, and tell him that the troops were coming, and that he was to be trapped into firing upon them. She knew that many lives depended upon her endurance, courage, and strategy; many lives, but most of all Alan Macdonald's life. He must be warned, at the cost of her own safety, her own life, if necessary.

To that end the troops must be followed, and a desperate dash at daylight must be made into Macdonald's camp. Perhaps it would be a race with the cavalry at the last moment.

Banjo said it was beginning to feel like morning. An hour past they had crossed the river at the ford near Macdonald's place, and the foothills stood rough and black against the starry horizon. They were near them now, so near that the deeper darkness of their timbered sides fell over them like a cold shadow.

Suddenly she checked Banjo with a sharp word.

"I heard them!" she whispered.

Banjo's little horse, eager for the fellowship of its kind as his master was for his own in his way, threw up its head and whinnied. Banjo churned it with his heels, slapped it on the side of the head, and shut off the shrill call in a grunt, but the signal had gone abroad. From the blackness ahead it was answered, and the slow wind prowling down from the hills ahead of dawn carried the scent of cigarettes to them as they waited breathlessly for results.

"They're dismounted, and waiting for daylight," she said. "We must ride around them."

They were leaving the road, the low brush rasping harshly on their stirrups — as loud as a bugle-call, it seemed to Frances — when a dash of hoofs from ahead told that a detachment was coming to investigate. Now there came a hail. Frances stopped; Banjo behind her whispered to know what they should do.

"Keep that little fool horse still!" she said.

Now the patrol, which had stopped to hail, was coming on again. Banjo's horse was not to be sequestered, nor his craving for companionship in that lonesome night suppressed. He lifted his shrill nicker again, and a shot from the outriders of cavalry was the answer.

"Answer them, tell them who you are Banjo — they all know you — and I'll slip away. Good-bye, and thank you for your brave help!"

"I'll go with you, they'll hear one as much as they'll hear two."

"No, no, you can help me much better by doing as I tell you. Tell them that a led horse got away from you, and that's the noise of it running away."

She waited for no more words, for the patrol was very near, and now and then one of them fired as he rode. Banjo yelled to them.

"Say, you fellers! Stop that fool shootin' around here, I tell you!"

"Who are you?" came the answer.

"Banjo, you darned fool! And I tell you right now, pardner, the first man that busts my fiddle with a bullet'll have to mix with me!"

The soldiers came up laughing, and heard Banjo's explanation of the horse, still dimly heard, galloping off. Frances stopped to listen. Presently she heard them coming on again, evidently not entirely satisfied with Banjo's story. But the parley with him had delayed them; she had a good lead now.

In a little swale, where the greasewood reached above her head, she stopped again to listen. She heard the troopers beating the bushes away off to one side, and knew that they soon would give it up. When they passed out of her hearing, she rode on, slowly, and with caution.

She was frontiersman enough to keep her direction by the north star — Colonel Landcraft had seen to that particular of her education himself — but Polaris would not tell her which way to go to find Alan Macdonald and his dusty men standing their vigil over their cooped-up enemies. Nothing but luck, she knew,

could lead her there, for she was in a sea of sage-brush, with the black river valley behind her, the blacker hills ahead, and never a mark of a trail to follow anywhere.

She had rounded the cavalry troop and left it far behind; the silence which immersed the sleeping land told her this. No hoof but her own mount's beat the earth within sound, no foot but hers strained saddle-leather within reach of her now, she believed.

There was only one thing to do; ride slowly in the direction that she had been holding with Banjo, and keep eyes, ears, and nose all on the watch. The ways of the range were early; if there was anybody within a mile of her to windward she would smell the smoke of his fire when he lit it, and see the wink of it, too, unless he built it low.

But it was neither the scent of fire nor the red eye of it winking on the hill that at length gave her despairing heart a fresh handful of hope — nothing less indeed than the aroma of boiling coffee. It had such a feeling of comfort and welcome, of domesticity and peace in it that she felt as if she approached a door with a friend standing ready to take her horse.

Her horse was not insensible to the cheer that somebody was brewing for himself in that wild place. She felt him quicken under her, and put up his head eagerly, and go forward as if he was nearing home. She wondered how far the smell of coffee would carry, and subsequent experience was a revelation on that point.

She had entered the hills, tracking back that wavering scent of coffee, which rose fresh and sudden now, and trailed away the next moment to the mere color of a smell. Now she had it, now she lost it, as she wound over rugged ridges and through groves of quaking-asp and balm of Gilead trees, always mounting among the hills, her eager horse taking the way without guidance, as keen on the scent as she.

It must have taken her an hour to run down that coffee pot. Morning was coming among the fading stars when she mounted a long ridge, the quick striding of her horse indicating that there was something ahead at last, and came upon the camp fire, the coffee, and the cook, all beside a splintered gray rock that rose as high as a house out of the barrenness of the hill.

The coffee-maker was a woman, and her pot was of several gallons' capacity. She was standing with the cover of the boiler in one hand, a great spoon in the other, her back half bent over her beverage, in the position that the sound of Frances' coming had struck her. She did not move out of that alert pose of suspicion until Frances drew rein within a few feet of her and gave her good-morning. When the poor harried creature saw that the visitor was a woman, her fright gave place to wonder.

Frances introduced herself without parley, and made inquiry for Macdonald.

"Why, bless your heart, you don't aim to tell me you rode all the way from the post in the night by

yourself?" the simple, friendly creature said. "Well, Mr. Macdonald and most of the men they've left to take them scoun'rels sent in here by the cattlemen to murder all of us over to the jail at Meander."

"How long have they been gone?"

"Why, not so very long. I reckon you must 'a' missed meetin' 'em by a hair."

"I've got to catch up with them, right away! Is there anybody here that can guide me?"

"My son can, and he'll be glad. He's just went to sleep back there in the tent after guardin' them fellers all night. I'll roust him out."

The pioneer woman came back almost at once, and pressed a cup of her coffee upon Frances. Frances took the tin vessel eagerly, for she was chilled from her long ride. Then she dismounted to rest her horse while her guide was getting ready, and warm her numb feet at the fire. She told the woman how the scent of her coffee had led her out of her groping like a beacon light on the hill.

"It's about three miles from here down to the valley," the woman said. "Coffee will carry on the mornin' air that way."

"Do you think your son — ?"

"He's a-comin'," the woman replied.

The boy came around the rock, leading a horse. He was wide awake and alert, bare-footed, bare-headed, and without a coat. He leaped nimbly onto his bare-backed beast, and Frances got into her saddle as fast as her numb limbs would lift her.

As she road away after the recklessly riding youth, she felt the hope that she had warmed in her bosom all night paling to a shadow. It seemed that circumstances were ranging after a chart marked out for them, and that her own earnest effort to interfere could not turn aside the tragedy set for the gray valley below her.

Morning was broadening now; she could see her guide distinctly even when he rode many rods ahead. Dawn was the hour for treacherous men and deeds of stealth; Chadron would be on the way again before now, with the strength of the United States behind him to uphold his outlawed hand.

When they came down into the valley there was a low-spreading mist over the gray sage, which lent a warmth to the raw morning wind. There was a sense of indistinctness through the mist which was an ally to Chadron. Ten rods away, even in the growing morning, it would have been impossible to tell a cowboy from a cavalryman.

Here a haystack smoldered in what had been a farmstead yard; its thin blue smoke wavered up in the morning, incense over the dead hope of the humble heart that had dreamed it had found a refuge in that spot. At the roadside a little farther on the burned ruins of a cabin lay. It had stood so near the wheel track that the heat of its embers was warm on Frances' face as she galloped by. The wire fence was cut between each post, beyond splicing or repair; the shrubs which some home-hungry woman had

set in her dooryard were trampled; the well curb was overthrown.

Over and over again as they rode that sad picture was repeated. Destruction had swept the country, war had visited it. Side by side upon the adjoining lines many of the homesteaders had built their little houses, for the comfort of being near their kind. In the corner of each quarter section on either side of the road along the fertile valley, a little home had stood three days ago. Now all were gone, marked only by little heaps of embers which twinkled a dying glow in the breath of the morning wind.

Day was spreading now. From the little swells in the land as she mounted them Frances could see the deeper mist hovering in the low places, the tops of tall shrubs and slender quaking-asp showing above it as if they stood in snow. The band of sunrise was broadening across the east; far down near the horizon a little slip of lemon-rind moon was faltering out of sight.

But there was no sight, no sound, of anybody in the road ahead. She spurred up beside her guide and asked him if there was any other way that they might have taken. No, he said; they would have to go that way, for there was only one fordable place in the river for many miles. He pointed to the road, fresh-turned by many hoofs, and clamped his lean thighs to his bare horse, galloping on.

"We'll take a cut acrosst here, and maybe head 'em off," he said, dashing away through the stirrup-

high sage, striking close to the hills again, and into rougher going.

The ache of the most intense anxiety that she ever had borne was upon Frances; hope was only a shred in her hand. She believed now that all her desperate riding must come to nothing in the end.

She never had been that long in the saddle before in her life. Her body was numb with cold and fatigue; she felt the motion of her horse, heard its pounding feet in regular beat as it held to its long, swinging gallop, but with the detached sense of being no party to it. All that was sharp in her was the pain of her lost struggle. For she expected every moment to hear firing, and to come upon confusion and death at the next lift of the hill.

In their short cut across the country they had mounted the top of a long, slender ridge, which reached down into the valley like a finger. Now her guide pulled up his horse so suddenly that it slid forward on stiff legs, its hoofs plowing the loose shale.

"You'd better go back—there's goin' to be a fight!" he said, a look of shocked concern in his big wild eyes.

"Do you see them? Where—"

"There they are!"—he clutched her arm, leaning and pointing—"and there's a bunch of fellers comin' to meet 'em that they don't see! I tell you there's goin' to be a fight!"

CHAPTER XIX

"I BEAT HIM TO IT"

THE last dash of that long ride was only a whirlwind of emotions to Frances. It was a red streak. She did not know what became of the boy; she left him there as she lashed her horse past him on the last desperate stretch.

The two forces were not more than half a mile apart, the cavalry just mounting at the ruins of a homestead where she knew they had stopped for breakfast at the well. A little band of outriders was setting off, a scouting party under the lead of Chadron, she believed. Macdonald's men, their prisoners under guard between two long-strung lines of horsemen, were proceeding at a trot. Between the two forces the road made a long curve. Here it was bordered by brushwood that would hide a man on horseback.

When Frances broke through this screen which had hidden the cavalry from Macdonald, she found the cavalcade halted, for Macdonald had seen her coming down the hill. She told him in few words what her errand to him was, Tom Lassiter and those who rode with him at the head of the column pressing around.

The question and mystification in Macdonald's face at her coming cleared with her brisk words. There was no wonder to him any more in her being

there. It was like her to come, winging through the night straight to him, like a dove with a message. If it had been another woman to take up that brave and hardy task, then there would have been marvel in it. As it was, he held out his hand to her, silently, like one man to another in a pass where words alone would be weak and lame.

"I was looking for Chadron to come with help and attempt a rescue, and I was moving to forestall him, but we were late getting under way. They"—waving his hand toward the prisoners—"held out until an hour ago."

"You must think, and think fast!" she said. "They're almost here!"

"Yes. I'm going ahead to meet them, and offer to turn these prisoners over to Major King. They'll have no excuse for firing on us then."

"No, no! some other way—think of some other way!"

He looked gravely into her anxious, pleading eyes. "Why, no matter, Frances. If they've come here to do that, they'll do it, but this way they'll have to do it in the open, not by a trick."

"I'll go with you," she said.

"I think perhaps—"

"I'll go!"

Macdonald turned to Lassiter in a few hurried words. She pressed to his side as the two rode away alone to meet the troops, repeating as if she had been denied:

"I'll go!"

There was a dash of hoofs behind them, and a man who rode like a sack of bran came bouncing up, excitement over his large face.

"What's up, Macdonald — where're you off to?" he inquired.

Macdonald told him in a word, riding forward as he spoke. He introduced the stranger as a newspaper correspondent from Chicago, who had arrived at the homesteaders' camp the evening past.

"So they got troops, did they?" the newspaper man said, riding forward keenly. "Yes, they told me down in Cheyenne they'd put that trick through. Here they come!"

Macdonald spurred ahead, holding up his right hand in the Indian sign of peace. Major King was riding with Chadron at the head of the vanguard. They drew rein suddenly at sight of what appeared to be such a formidable force at Macdonald's back, for at that distance, and with the dimness of the scattering mist, it appeared as if several hundred horsemen were approaching.

Distrustful of Chadron, fearing that he might induce Major King to shoot Macdonald down as he sat there making overtures of peace, Frances rode forward and joined him, the correspondent coming jolting after her in his horn-riding way. After a brief parley among themselves Chadron and King, together with three or four officers, rode forward. One remained behind, and halted the column as it

came around the brushwood screen at the turn of the road.

Major King greeted Frances as he rode up, scowling in high dignity. Chadron could not cover his surprise so well as Major King at seeing her there, her horse in a sweat, her habit torn where the brambles had snatched at her in her hard ride to get ahead of the troops. He gave her a cold good-morning, and sat in the attitude of a man pricking up his ears as he leaned a little to peer into the ranks of the force ahead.

The homesteaders had come to a halt a hundred yards behind Macdonald; about the same distance behind Major King and his officers the cavalry had drawn up across the road. Major King sat in brief silence, as if waiting for Macdonald to begin. He looked the homesteader captain over with severe eyes.

"Well, sir?" said he.

"We were starting for Meander, Major King, to deliver to the sheriff fifty men whom we have taken in the commission of murder and arson," Macdonald replied, with dignity. "Up to a few minutes ago we had no information that martial law had superseded the civil in this troubled country, but since that is the case, we will gladly turn our prisoners over to you, with the earnest request that they be held, collectively and individually, to answer for the crimes they have committed here."

"Them's my men, King — they've got 'em there!" said Chadron, boiling over the brim.

"This expedition has come to the relief of certain men, attacked and surrounded in the discharge of their duty by a band of cattle thieves of which you are the acknowledged head," replied Major King.

"Then you have come on a mistaken errand, sir," Macdonald told him.

"I have come into this lawless country to restore order and insure the lives and safety of property of the people to whom it belongs."

"The evidence of these hired raiders' crimes lies all around you, Major King," Macdonald said. "These men swept in here in the employ of the cattle interests, burned these poor homes, and murdered such of the inhabitants as were unable to fly to safety in the hills ahead of them. We are appealing to the law; the cattlemen never have done that."

"Say, Mr. Soldier, let me tell you something"—the newspaper correspondent, to whom one man's dignity was as much as another's, kicked his horse forward—"these raiders that bloody-handed Chadron sent in here have murdered children and women, do you know that?"

"Who in the hell are you?" Chadron demanded, bristling with rage, whirling his horse to face him.

"This is Chadron," Macdonald said, a little flash of humor in his eyes over Chadron's hearing the truth about himself from an unexpected source.

"Well, I'm glad I've run into you, Chadron; I've got a little list of questions to ask you," the correspondent told him, far from being either impressed

or cowed. "Neel is my name, of the *Chicago Tribune*, I've—"

"You'd just as well keep your questions for another day—you'll send nothing out of here!" said Major King, sharply.

Neel looked across his nose at King with triumphant leer.

"I've sent out something, Mr. Soldier-man," said he; "it was on the wire by midnight last night, rushed to Meander by courier, and it's all over the country this morning. It's a story that'll give the other side of this situation up here to the war department, and it'll make this whole nation climb up on its hind legs and howl. Murder? Huh, murder's no name for it!"

Chadron was growling something below his breath into King's ear.

"Forty-three men and boys—look at them, there they are—rounded up fifty of the cutthroats the Drovers' Association rushed up here from Cheyenne on a special train to wipe the homesteaders out," Neel continued, rising to considerable heat in the partisanship of his new light. "Five dollars a day was the hire of that gang, and five dollars bonus for every man, woman, or baby that they killed! Yes, I've got signed statements from them, Chadron, and I'd like to know what you've got to say, if anything?"

"Disarm that rabble," said Major King, speaking to a subordinate officer, "and take charge of the men they have been holding."

"Sir, I protest—" Macdonald began.

"I have no words to waste on you!" Major King cut him off shortly.

"I'd play a slow hand on that line, King, and a careful one, if I were you," advised Neel. "If you take these men's guns away from them they'll be at the mercy of Chadron's brigands. I tell you, man, I know the situation in this country!"

"Thank you," said King, in cold hauteur.

Chadron's eyes were lighting with the glitter of revenge. He sat grinding his bridle-reins in his gloved hand, as if he had the bones of the nesters in his palm at last.

"You will proceed, with the rescued party under guard, to Meander," continued Major King to his officer, speaking as if he had plans for his own employment aside from the expedition. "There, Mr. Chadron will furnish transportation to return them whence they came."

"I'll furnish—" began Chadron, in amazement at this unexpected turn.

"Transportation, sir," completed Major King, in his cold way.

"These men should be held to the civil authorities for trial in this county, and not set free," Macdonald protested, indignant over the order.

Major King ignored him. He was still looking at Chadron, who was almost choking on his rage.

"Hell! Do you mean to tell me the whole damn thing's goin' to fizzle out this way, King? I want

something done, I tell you — I want something *done!* I didn't bring you up here — "

"Certainly not, sir!" snapped King.

"My orders to you — " Chadron flared.

"It happens that I am not marching under your orders at — "

"The hell you ain't!" Chadron exploded.

"It's an outrage on humanity to turn those scoundrels loose, Major King!" Neel said. "Why, I've got signed statements, I tell you — "

"Remove this man to the rear!" Major King addressed a lieutenant, who communicated the order to the next lowest in rank immediately at hand, who passed it on to two troopers, who came forward briskly and rode the protesting correspondent off between them.

Other troopers were collecting the arms of the homesteaders, a proceeding which Macdonald witnessed with a sick heart. Frances, sitting her horse in silence through all that had passed, gave him what comfort and hope she could express with her eyes.

"Detail a patrol of twenty men," Major King continued his instructions to his officer, "to keep the roads and disarm all individuals and bands encountered."

"That don't apply to my men!" declared Chadron, positively. In his face there was a dark threat of disaster for Major King's future hopes of advancement.

"It applies to everybody as they come," said

King. "Troops have come in here to restore order, and order will be restored."

Chadron was gaping in amazement. That feeling in him seemed to smother every other, even his hot rage against King for this sudden shifting of their plans and complete overthrow of the cattlemen's expectations of the troops. The one little comfort that he was to get out of the expedition was that of seeing his raiders taken out of Macdonald's hands and marched off to be set free.

Macdonald felt that he understood the change in King. The major had come there full of the intention of doing Chadron's will; he had not a doubt of that. But murder, even with the faint color of excuse that they would have contrived to give it, could not be done in the eyes of such a witness as Frances Landcraft. Subserviency, a bending of dignity even, could not be stooped to before one who had been schooled to hold a soldier's honor his most precious endowment.

Major King had shown a hand of half-fairness in treating both sides alike. That much was to his credit, at the worst. But he had not done it because he was a high-souled and honorable man. His eyes betrayed him in that, no matter how stern he tried to make them. The coming of that fair outrider in the night had turned aside a great tragedy, and saved Major King partly to himself, at least, and perhaps wholly to his career.

Macdonald tried to tell her in one long and earnest

look all this. She nodded, seeming to understand.

"You've double-crossed me, King," Chadron accused, in the flat voice of a man throwing down his hand. "I brought you up here to throw these nesters off of our land."

"The civil courts must decide the ownership of that," returned King, sourly. "Disarm that man!" He indicated Macdonald, and turned his horse as if to ride back and join his command.

The lieutenant appeared to feel that it would be no lowering of his dignity to touch the weapons of a man such as Macdonald's bearing that morning had shown him to be. He approached with a smile half apologetic. Chadron was sitting by on his horse watching the proceeding keenly.

"Pardon me," said the officer, reaching out to receive Macdonald's guns.

A swift change swept over Macdonald's face, a flush dyeing it to his ears. He sat motionless a little while, as if debating the question, the young officer's hand still outstretched. Macdonald dropped his hand, quickly, as if moved to shorten the humiliation, to the buckle of his belt, and opened it with deft jerk. At that moment Chadron, ten feet away, slung a revolver from his side and fired.

Macdonald rocked in his saddle as Frances leaped to the ground and ran to his side. He wilted forward, his hat falling, and crumpled into her arms. The lieutenant relieved her of her bloody burden, and eased Macdonald to the ground.

Major King came riding back. At his sharp command troopers surrounded Chadron, who sat with his weapon still poised, like one gazing at the mark at which he had fired, the smoke of his shot around him.

"In a second he'd 'a' got me! but I beat him to it, by God! I beat him to it!" he said.

Macdonald's belt had slipped free of his body. With its burden of cartridges and its two long pistols it lay at Frances' feet. She stooped, a little sound in her throat between a sob and a cry, jerked one of the guns out, wheeled upon Chadron and fired. The lieutenant struck up her arm in time to save the cattleman's life. The blow sent the pistol whirling out of her hand.

"They will go off that way, sometimes," said the young officer, with apology in his soft voice.

The soldiers closed around Chadron and hurried him away. A moment Major King sat looking at Macdonald, whose blood was wasting in the roadside dust from a wound in his chest. Then he flashed a look into Frances' face that had a sneer of triumph in it, wheeled his horse and galloped away.

In a moment the lieutenant was summoned, leaving Frances alone between the two forces with Macdonald. She did not know whether he was dead. She dropped to her knees in the dust and began to tear frantically at his shirt to come to the wound. Tom Lassiter came hurrying up with others, denouncing the treacherous shot, swearing vengeance on the cowardly head that had conceived so murderous a thing.

Lassiter said that he was not dead, and set to work to stem the blood. It seemed to Frances that the world had fallen away from her, leaving her alone. She stood aside a little, her chin up in her old imperious way, her eyes on the far hills where the tender sunlight was just striking among the white-limbed aspen trees. But her heart was bent down to the darkness of despair.

She asked no questions of the men who were working so earnestly after their crude way to check that precious stream; she stood in the activity of passing troopers and escorted raiders insensible of any movement or sound in all the world around her. Only when Tom Lassiter stood from his ministrations and looked at her with understanding in his old weary eyes she turned her face back again, slowly resolute, to see if he had died.

Her throat was dry. It took an effort to bring a sound from it, and then it was strained and wavering.

"Is he — dead?"

"No, miss, he ain't dead," Tom answered. But there was such a shadow of sorrow and pain in his eyes that tears gushed into her own.

"Will — will — "

Tom shook his head. "The Lord that give him alone can answer that," he said, a feeling sadness in his voice.

The troops had moved on, save the detail singled for police duty. These were tightening girths and trimming for the road again a little way from the

spot where Macdonald lay. The lieutenant returned hastily.

"Miss Landcraft, I am ordered to convey you to Alamito Ranch — under guard," said he.

Banjo Gibson, held to be harmless and insignificant by Major King, had been set free. Now he came up, leading his horse, shocked to the deepest fibers of his sensitive soul by the cowardly deed that Saul Chadron had done.

"It went clean through him!" he said, rising from his inspection of Macdonald's wound. And then, moved by the pain in Frances' tearless eyes, he enlarged upon the advantages of that from a surgical view. "The beauty of a hole in a man's chest like that is that it lets the pizen dreen off," he told her. "It wouldn't surprise me none to see Mac up and around inside of a couple of weeks, for he's as hard as old hick'ry."

"Well, I'm not going to Alamito Ranch and leave him out here to die of neglect, orders or no orders!" said she to the lieutenant.

The young officer's face colored; he plucked at his new mustache in embarrassment. Perhaps the prospect of carrying a handsome and dignified young lady in his arms for a matter of twenty-odd miles was not as alluring to him as it might have been to another, for he was a slight young man, only a little while out of West Point. But orders were orders, and he gave Frances to understand that in diplomatic and polite phrasing.

She scorned him and his veneration for orders, and turned from him coldly.

"Is there no doctor with your detachment?" she asked.

"He has gone on with the main body, Miss Landcraft. They have several wounded."

"Wounded murderers and burners of homes! Well, I'm not going to Alamito Ranch with you, sir, unless you can contrive an ambulance of some sort and take this gentleman too."

The officer brightened. He believed it could be arranged. Inside of an hour he had Tom Lassiter around with a team and spring wagon, in which the homesteaders laid Macdonald tenderly upon a bed of hay.

Banjo waited until they were ready to begin their slow march to the ranch, when he led his little horse forward.

"I'll go on to the agency after the doctor and send him over to Alamito as quick as he can go," he said. "And I'll see if Mother Mathews can go over, too. She's worth four doctors when it comes to keep the pizen from spreadin' in a wound."

Frances gave him her benediction with her eyes, and farewell with a warm handclasp, and Banjo's beribboned horse frisked off on its long trip, quite refreshed from the labors of the past night.

Frances was carrying Macdonald's cartridge belt and revolvers, the confiscation of which had been overlooked by Major King in the excitement of the

shooting. The young lieutenant hadn't the heart to take the weapons from her. Orders had been carried out; Macdonald had been disarmed. He let it go at that.

Frances rode in the wagon with Macdonald, a canteen of water slung over her shoulders. Now and then she moistened his lips with a little of it, and bathed his eyes, closed in pathetic weariness. He was unconscious still from the blow of Saul Chadron's big bullet. As she ministered to him she felt that he would open his eyes on this world's pains and cruel injustices nevermore.

And why had Major King ordered her, virtually under arrest, to Alamito Ranch, instead of sending her in disgrace to the post? Was it because he feared that she would communicate with her father from the post, and discover to him the treacherous compact between Chadron and King, or merely to take a mean revenge upon her by humiliating her in Nola Chadron's eyes?

He had taken the newspaper correspondent with him, and certainly would see that no more of the truth was sent out by him from that flame-swept country for several days. With her at the ranch, far from telegraphic communication with the world, nothing could go out from her that would enlighten the department on the deception that the cattlemen had practiced to draw the government into the conflict on their side. In the meantime, the Drovers' Association would be at work, spreading money with free

hand, corrupting evidence with the old dyes of falsehood.

Major King had seen his promised reward withdrawn through her intervention, and had made a play of being fair to both sides in the controversy, except that he kept one hand on Chadron's shoulder, so to speak, in making martyrs of those bloody men whom he had sent there to burn and kill. They were to be shipped safely back to their place, where they would disperse, and walk free of all prosecution afterwards. For that one service to the cattlemen Major King could scarcely hope to win his coveted reward.

She believed that Alan Macdonald would die. It seemed that the fever which would consume his feeble hope of life was already kindling on his lips. But she had no tears to pour out over him now. Only a great hardness in her heart against Saul Chadron, and a wild desire to lift her hand and strike him low.

Whether Major King would make her attempt against Chadron's life, or her interference with his military expedition his excuse for placing her under guard, remained for the future to develop. She turned these things in her mind as they proceeded along the white river road toward the ranch.

It came noontime, and decline of sun; the shadow of the mountains reached down into the valley, the mist came purple again over the foothills, the fire of sunset upon the clouds. Alan Macdonald still lived, his strong harsh face turned to the fading skies, his tired eyelids closed upon his dreams.

CHAPTER XX

LOVE AND DEATH

MAGGIE and Alvino had the ranch to themselves when the military party from the upper valley arrived, Mrs. Chadron and Nola having driven to Meander that morning. It had been their intention to return that evening, Maggie said. Mrs. Chadron had gone after chili peppers, and other things, but principally chili peppers. There was not one left in the house, and the mistress could not live without them, any more than fire could burn without wood.

Dusk had settled when they reached the ranch, and night thickened fast. The lieutenant dropped two men at the corral gate — her guard, Frances understood — and went back to his task of watching for armed men upon the highroads.

Under the direction of Frances, Maggie had placed a cot in Mrs. Chadron's favored sitting-room with the fireplace. There Macdonald lay in clean sheets, a blaze on the hearth, and Maggie was washing his wound with hot water, groaning in the pity which is the sweetest part of the women of her homely race.

"I think that he will live, miss," she said hopefully. "See, he has a strong breath on my damp hand — I can feel it like a little wind."

She spoke in her native tongue, which Frances understood thoroughly from her years in Texas and

Arizona posts. Frances shook her head sorrowfully.

"I am afraid his breath will fail soon, Maggie."

"No, if they live the first hour after being shot, they get well," Maggie persisted, with apparent sincerity. "Here, put your hand on his heart — do you feel it? What a strong heart he has to live so well! what a strong, strong heart!"

"Yes, a strong, strong heart!" Tears were falling for him now that there was none to see them, scalding their way down her pale cheeks.

"He must have carried something sacred with him to give him such strength, such life."

"He carried honor," said Frances, more to herself than to Maggie, doubting that she would understand.

"And love, maybe?" said Maggie, with soft word, soft upward-glancing of her feeling dark eyes.

"Who can tell?" Frances answered, turning her head away.

Maggie drew the sheet over him and stood looking down into his severe white face.

"If he could speak he would ask for his mother, and for water then, and after that the one he loves. That is the way a man's mind carries those three precious things when death blows its breath in his face."

"I do not know," said Frances, slowly.

There was such stress in waiting, such silence in the world, and such emptiness and pain! Reverently as Maggie's voice was lowered, soft and sympathetic as her word, Frances longed for her to be still, and

go and leave her alone with him. She longed to hold the dear spark of his faltering life in her own hands, alone, quite alone; to warm it back to strength in her own lone heart. Surely her name could not be the last in his remembrance, no matter for the disturbing breath of death.

"I will bring you some food," said Maggie. "To give him life out of your life you must be strong."

Frances started out of her sleep in the rocking-chair before the fire. She had turned the lamp low, but there was a flare of light on her face. Her faculties were so deeply sunk in that insidious sleep which had crept upon her like a bindweed upon wheat that she struggled to rise from it. She sprang up, her mind groping, remembering that there was something for which she was under heavy responsibility, but unable for a moment to bring it back to its place.

Nola was in the door with a candle, shading the flame from her eyes with her hand. Her hair was about her shoulders, her feet were bare under the hem of her long dressing-robe. She was staring, her lips were open, her breath was quick, as if she had arrived after a run.

"Is he — alive?" she whispered.

"Why should you come to ask? What is his life to you?" asked Frances, sorrowfully bitter.

"Oh, Maggie just woke and came up to tell me, mother doesn't know — she's just gone to bed. Isn't it terrible, Frances!"

Nola spoke distractedly, as if in great agony, or great fear.

"He can't harm any of you now, you're safe." Frances was hard and scornful. She turned from Nola and laid her hand on Macdonald's brow, drawing her breath with a relieved sigh when she felt the warmth of life still there.

"Oh, Frances, Frances!" Nola moaned, with expression of despair, "isn't this terrible!"

"If you mean it's terrible to have him here, I can't help it. I'm a prisoner, here against my will. I couldn't leave him out there alone to die."

Nola lowered her candle and stared at Frances, her eyes big and blank of everything but a wild expression that Frances had read as fear.

"Will he die?" she whispered.

"Yes; you are to have your heartless way at last. He will die, and his blood will be on this house, never to be washed away!"

"Why didn't you come back when we called you — both of you?" Nola drew near, reaching out an appealing hand. Frances shrank from her, to bend quickly over Macdonald when he groaned and moved his head.

"Put out that light — it's in his eyes!" she said.

Nola blew out the candle and came glimmering into the room in her soft white gown.

"Don't blame me, Frances, don't blame any of us. Mother and I wanted to save you both, we tried to stop the men, and we could have held them back if

it hadn't been for Chance. Chance got three of them to go, the others—"

"They paid for that!" said Frances, a little lift of triumph in her voice.

"Yes, but they—"

"Chance didn't do it, I tell you! If he says he did it he lies! It was—somebody else."

"The soldiers?"

"No, not the soldiers."

"I thought maybe—I saw one of them on guard in front of the house as we came in."

"He's guarding me, I'm under arrest, I tell you. The soldiers have nothing to do with him."

Nola stood looking down at Macdonald, who was deathly white in the weak light of the low, shaded lamp. With a little timid outreaching, a little starting and drawing back, she touched his forehead, where a thick lock of his shaggy hair fell over it, like a sheaf of ripe wheat burst from its band.

"Oh, it breaks my heart to see him dying—it—breaks—my—heart!" she sobbed.

"You struck him! You're not—you're not *fit* to touch him—take your hand away!"

Frances pushed her hand away roughly. Nola drew back, drenched with a sudden torrent of penitential tears.

"I know it, I know it!" she confessed in bitterness, "I knew it when he took me away from those people in the mountains and brought me home. He carried me in his arms when I was tired, and sang to me as

we rode along there in the lonesome night! He sang to me, just like I was a little child, so I wouldn't be afraid — afraid — of him!"

"Oh, and you struck him, you struck him like a dog!"

"I've suffered more for that than I hurt him, Frances — it's been like fire in my heart!"

"I pray to God it will burn up your wicked pride!"

"We believed him, mother and I believed him, in spite of what Chance said. Oh, if you'd only come back then, Frances, this thing wouldn't have happened!"

"I can't see what good that would have done," said Frances, wearily; "there are others who don't believe him. They'd have got him some time, just like they got him — in a coward's underhanded way, never giving him a chance for his life."

"We went to Meander this morning thinking we'd catch father there before he left. We wanted to tell him about Mr. Macdonald, and get him to drop this feud. If we could have seen him I know he'd have done what we asked, for he's got the noblest heart in the world!"

Whatever Frances felt on the noble nature of Saul Chadron she held unexpressed. She did not feel that it fell to her duty to tell Nola whose hand had struck Macdonald down, although she believed that the cattleman's daughter deserved whatever pain and humiliation the revelation might bring. For it was

as plain as if Nola had confessed it in words that she had much more than a friendly feeling of gratitude for the foeman of her family.

Her heart was as unstable as mercury, it seemed. Frances despised her for her fickleness, scorned her for the mean face of friendship over the treachery of her soul. Not that she regretted Major King. Nola was free to take him and make the most of him. But she was not to come in as a wedge to rive her from this man.

Let her pay her debt of gratitude in something else than love. Living or dead, Alan Macdonald was not for Nola Chadron. Her penance and her tears, her moanings and sobs and her broken heart, even that, if it should come, could not pay for the humiliation and the pain which that house had brought upon him.

"When did it happen?" asked Nola, the gust of her weeping past.

"This morning, early."

"Who did it — how did it happen? You got away from Chance — you said it wasn't Chance."

"We got away from that gang yesterday; this happened this morning, miles from that place."

"Who was it? Why don't you tell me, Frances?"

They were standing at Macdonald's side. A little spurt of flame among the ends of wood in the chimney threw a sudden illumination over them, and played like water over a stone upon Macdonald's face, then sank again, as if it had been plunged in ashes. Frances remained silent, her vindictiveness, her

hardness of heart, against this vacillating girl dying away as the flame had died. It was not her desire to hurt her with that story of treachery and cowardice which must leave its stain upon her name for many a year.

"The name of the man who shot him is a curse and a blight on this land, a mockery of every holy human thought. I'll not speak it."

Nola stared at her, horror speaking from her eyes. "He must be a monster!"

"He is the lowest of the accursed — a coward!" Frances said.

Nola shuddered, standing silently by the couch a little while. Then: "But I want to help you, Frances, if you'll let me."

"There's nothing that you can do. I'm waiting for Mrs. Mathews and the doctor from the agency."

"You can go up and rest until they come, Frances, you look so tired and pale. I'll watch by him — you can tell me what to do, and I'll call you when they come."

"No; I'll stay until — I'll stay here."

"Oh, please go, Frances; you're nearly dead on your feet."

"Why do you want me to leave him?" Frances asked, in a flash of jealous suspicion. She turned to Nola, as if to search out her hidden intention.

"You were asleep in your chair when I came in, Frances," Nola chided her, gently.

Again they stood in silence, looking down upon the

wounded man. Frances was resentful of Nola's interest in him, of her presence in the room. She was on the point of asking her to leave when Nola spoke.

"If he hadn't been so proud, if he'd only stooped to explain things to us, to talk to us, even, this could have been avoided, Frances."

"What could he have said?" Frances asked, wondering, indeed, what explanation could have lessened his offense in Saul Chadron's eyes.

"If I had known him, I would have understood," Nola replied, vaguely, in soft low voice, as if communing with herself.

"You! Well, perhaps — perhaps even you would have understood."

"Look — he moved!"

"Sh-h-h! your talking disturbs him, Nola. Go to bed — you can't help me any here."

"And leave him all to you!"

The words flashed from Nola, as if they had sprung out of her mouth before her reason had given them permission to depart.

"Of course with me; he's mine!"

"If he's going to die, Frances, can't I share him with you till the end — can't I have just a little share in the care of him here with you?"

Nola laid her hand on Frances' arm as she pleaded, turning her white face appealingly in the dim light.

"Don't talk that way, girl!" said Frances, roughly; "you have no part in him at all — he is nothing to you."

"He is all to me — everything to me! Oh, Frances! If you knew, if you knew!"

"What? If I knew what?" Frances caught her arm in fierce grip, and shook her savagely.

"Don't — don't — hurt me, Frances!" Nola cringed and shrank away, and lifted her arms as if to ward a blow.

"What did you mean by that? Tell me — tell me!"

"Oh, the way it came to me, the way it came to me as he carried me in his arms and sang to me so I wouldn't be afraid!" moaned Nola, her face hidden in her hands. "I never knew before what it was to care for anybody that way — I never, never knew before!"

"You can't have this man, nor any share in him, living or dead! I gave up Major King to you; be satisfied."

"Oh, Major King!"

"Poor shadow that he is in comparison with a man, he'll have to serve for you. Living or dead, I tell you, this man is mine. Now go!"

Nola was shaking again with sudden gust of weeping. She had sunk to the floor at the head of the couch, a white heap, her bare arms clasping her head.

"It breaks my heart to see him die!" she moaned, rocking herself in her grief like a child.

And child Frances felt her to be in her selfishness, a child never denied, and careless and unfeeling of the rights of others from this long indulgence. She

doubted Nola's sincerity, even in the face of such demonstrative evidence. There was no pity for her, and no softness.

"Get up!" Frances spoke sternly — "and go to your room."

"He must not be allowed to die — he must be saved!" Nola reached out her hands, standing now on her knees, as if to call back his struggling soul.

"Belated tears will not save him. Get up — it's time for you to go."

Nola bent forward suddenly, her hair sweeping the wounded man's face, her lips near his brow. Frances caught her with a sound in her throat like a growl, and flung her back.

"You'll not kiss him — you'll never kiss him!" she said.

Nola sprang up, not crying now, but hot with sudden anger.

"If you were out of the way he'd love me!"

"Love *you!* you little cat!"

"Yes, he'd love me — I'd take him away from you like I've taken other men! He'd love me, I tell you — he'd love *me!*"

Frances looked at her steadily a moment, contempt in her eloquent face. "If you have no other virtue in you, at least have some respect for the dying," she said.

"He's not dying, he'll not die!" Nola hotly denied. "He'll live — live to love me!"

"Go! This room —"

"It's my house; I'll go and come in it when I please."

"I'm a prisoner in it, not a guest. I'll force you out of the room if I must. This disgraceful behavior must end, and end this minute. Are you going?"

"If you were out of the way, he'd love me," said Nola from the door, spiteful, resentful, speaking slowly, as if pressing each word into Frances' brain and heart; "if you were out of the way."

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN IN THE DOOR

WHEN the doctor from the agency arrived at dawn, hours after Mrs. Mathews, he found everything done for the wounded man that skill and experience could suggest. Mrs. Mathews had carried instruments, antiseptics, bandages, with her, and she had no need to wait for anybody's directions in their use. So the doctor, who had been reinforced by the same capable hands many a time before, took a cup of hot coffee and rode home.

Mrs. Mathews moved about as quietly as a nun, and with that humility and sense of self-effacement that comes of penances and pains, borne mainly for others who have fallen with bleeding feet beside the way.

She was not an old woman, only as work and self-sacrifice had aged her. Her abundant black hair — done up in two great braids which hung in front of her shoulders, Indian-wise, and wrapped at their ends with colored strings — was salted over with gray, but her beautiful small hands were as light and swift as any girl's. Good deeds had blessed them with eternal youth, it seemed.

She wore a gray dress, sprinkled over with twinkling little Indian gauds and bits of finery such as the squaws love. This barbaric adornment seemed un-

accountable in the general sobriety of her dress, for not a jewel, save her wedding-ring alone, adorned her. Frances did not marvel that she felt so safe in this gentle being's presence, safe for herself, safe for the man who was more to her than her own soul.

When the doctor had come and gone, Mrs. Mathews pressed Frances to retire and sleep. She spoke with soft clearness, none of that hesitation in her manner that Frances had marked on the day that they rode up and surrounded her where the Indians were waiting their rations of beef.

"You know how it happened — who did it?" Frances asked. She was willing to leave him with her, indeed, but reluctant to go until she had given expression to a fear that hung over her like a threat.

"Banjo told me," Mrs. Mathews said, nodding her graceful little head.

"I'm afraid that when Chadron comes home and finds him here, he'll throw him out to die," Frances whispered. "I've been keeping Mr. Macdonald's pistols ready to — to — make a fight of it, if necessary. Maybe you could manage it some other way."

Frances was on her knees beside her new friend, her anxiety speaking from her tired eyes, full of their shadows of pain. Mrs. Mathews drew her close, and smoothed back Frances' wilful, redundant hair with soothing touch. For a little while she said nothing, but there was much in her delicate silence that told she understood.

"No, Chadron will not do that," she said at last.

"He is a violent, blustering man, but I believe he owes me something that will make him do in this case as I request. Go to sleep, child. When he wakes he'll be conscious, but too weak for anything more than a smile."

Frances went away assured, and stole softly up the stairs. The sun was just under the hill; Mrs. Chadron would be stirring soon. Nola was up already, Frances heard with surprise as she passed her door, moving about her room with quick step. She hesitated there a moment, thinking to turn back and ask Mrs. Mathews to deny her the hospital room. But such a request would seem strange, and it would be difficult to explain. She passed on into the room that she had lately occupied. Soothed by her great confidence in Mrs. Mathews, she fell asleep, her last waking hope being that when she stood before Alan Macdonald's couch again it would be to see him smile.

Frances woke toward the decline of day, with upbraidings for having yielded to nature's ministrations for so long. Still, everything must be progressing well with Alan Macdonald, or Mrs. Mathews would have called her. She regretted that she hadn't something to put on besides her torn and soiled riding habit to cheer him with the sight of when he should open his eyes to smile.

Anxious as she was, and fast as her heart fluttered, she took time to arrange her hair in the way that she liked it best. It seemed warrant to her that he

must find her handsomer for that. People argue that way, men in their gravity as well as women in their frivolity, each believing that his own appraisement of himself is the incontestable test, none rightly understanding how ridiculous pet foibles frequently make us all.

But there was nothing ridiculous in the coil of serene brown hair drawn low against a white neck, nor in the ripples of it at the temples, nor in the stately seriousness of the face that it shadowed and adorned. Frances Landcraft was right, among thousands who were wrong in her generation, in her opinion of what made her fairer in the eyes of men.

Her hand was on the door when a soft little step, like a wind in grass, came quickly along the hall, and a light hand struck a signal on the panel. Frances knew that it was Mrs. Mathews before she flung the door open and disclosed her. She was dressed to take the road again, and Frances drew back when she saw that, her blood falling away from her heart. She believed that he stood in need of her gentle ministrations no longer, and that she had come to tell her that he was dead.

Mrs. Mathews read her thought in her face, and shook her head with an assuring smile. She entered the room, still silent, and closed the door.

"No, he is far from dead," she said.

"Then why — why are you leaving?"

"The little lady of the ranch has stepped into my

place — but you need not be afraid for yours." Mrs. Mathews smiled again as she said that. "He asked for you with his first word, and he knows just how matters stand."

The color swept back over Frances' face, and ran down to hide in her bosom, like a secret which the world was not to see. Her heart leaped to hear that Maggie had been wrong in her application of the rule that applies to men in general when death is blowing its breath in their faces.

"But that little Nola isn't competent to take care of him — she'll kill him if she's left there with him alone!"

"With kindness, then," said Mrs. Mathews, not smiling now, but shaking her head in deprecation. "A surgeon is here, sent back by Major King, he told me, and he has taken charge of Mr. Macdonald, along with Miss Chadron and her mother. I have been dismissed, and you have been barred from the room where he lies. There's a soldier guarding the door to keep you away from his side."

"That's Nola's work," Frances nodded, her indignation hot in her cheek," she thinks she can batter her way into his heart if she can make him believe that I am neglecting him, that I have gone away."

"Rest easy, my dear, sweet child," counseled Mrs. Mathews, her hand on Frances' shoulder. "Mr. Macdonald will get well, and there is only one door to his heart, and somebody that I know is standing in that."

"But he — he doesn't understand; he'll think I've deserted him!" Frances spoke with trembling lips, tears darkling in her eyes.

"He knows how things stand; I had time to tell him that before they ousted me. I'd have taken time to tell him, even if I'd had to — pinch somebody's ear."

The soft-voiced little creature laughed when she said that. Frances felt her breath go deeper into her lungs with the relief of this assurance, and the threatening tears came falling over her fresh young cheeks. But they were tears of thankfulness, not of suspense or pain.

Frances did not trouble the soldier at the door to exercise his unwelcome and distasteful authority over her. But she saw that he was there, indeed, as she went out to give Mrs. Mathews farewell at the door.

Nola came pattering to her as she turned back in the house again to find Maggie, for her young appetite was clamoring. Nola's eyes were round, her face set in an expression of shocked protest.

"Isn't this an outrage, this high-handed business of Major King's?" She ran up all flushed and out of breath, as if she had been wrestling with her indignation and it had almost obtained the upper hand.

"What fresh tyranny is he guilty of?" Frances inquired, putting last night's hot words and hotter feelings behind her.

"Ordering a soldier to guard the door of Mr.

Macdonald's room, with iron-clad instructions to keep you away from him! He sent his orders back by Doctor Shirley — isn't it a petty piece of business?"

"Mrs. Mathews told me. At least you could have allowed her to stay."

"I?" Nola's eyes seemed to grow. She gazed and stared, injury, disbelief, pain, in her mobile expression. "Why, Frances, I didn't have a thing to do with it, not a thing! Mother and I protested against this military invasion of our house, but protests were useless. The country is under martial law, Doctor Shirley says."

"How did Major King know that Mr. Macdonald had been brought here? He rode away without giving any instructions for his disposal or care. I believe he wanted him to die there where he fell."

"I don't know how he came to hear it, unless the lieutenant here sent a report to him. But I ask you to believe me, Frances" — Nola put her hand on Frances' arm in her old wheedling, stroking way — "when I tell you I hadn't anything to do with it. In spite of what I said last night, I hadn't. I was wild and foolish last night, dear; I'm sorry for all of that."

"Never mind," Frances said.

"Don't you worry, we'll take care of him, mother and I. Major King's orders are that you're not to leave this house, but I tell you, Frances, if I wanted to go home I'd go!"

"So would I," returned Frances, with more meaning in her manner of speaking than in her words. "Does Major King's interdiction extend to the commissary? Am I going to be allowed to eat?"

"Maggie's got it all ready; I ran up to call you." Nola slipped her arm round Frances' waist and led her toward the kitchen, where Maggie had the table spread. "You'll not mind the kitchen? The house is so upset by those soldiers in it that we have no privacy left."

"Prisoners and pensioners should eat in the kitchen," Frances returned, trying to make a better appearance of friendliness for Nola than she carried in her heart.

Maggie was full of apologies for the poor service and humble surroundings. "It is the doings of miss," she whispered, in her native sibilant Mexican, when Nola found an excuse to leave Frances alone at her meal.

"It doesn't matter, Maggie; you eat in the kitchen, both of us are women."

"Yes, and some saints' images are made of lead, some of gold."

"But they are all saints' images, Maggie."

"The kitchen will be brighter from this day," Maggie declared, in the extravagant way of her race, only meaning more than usually carries in a Castilian compliment.

She backed away from the table, never having it in her delicate nature to be so rude as to turn her

back upon her guest, and admired Frances from a distance. The sun was reaching through a low window, moving slowly up the cloth as if stealing upon the guest to give her a good-night kiss.

"Ah, miss!" sighed Maggie, her hands clasped as in adoration, "no wonder that he lives with a well in his body. He has much to live for, and that is the truth from a woman's lips."

"It is worth more because of its rarity, then, Maggie," Frances said, warming over with blushes at this ingenuous praise. "Do they let you go into his room?"

"The door is open to the servant," Maggie replied, with solemn nod.

"It is closed to me — did you know?"

"I know. Miss tells you it is orders from some captain, some general, some soldier I do not know what" — a sweeping gesture to include all soldiers, great and small and far away — "but that is a lie. It came out of her own heart. She is a traitor to friendship, as well as a thief."

"Yes, I believed that from the beginning, Maggie."

"This house of deceit is not a place for me, for even servant that I am, I am a true servant. But I will not lie for a liar, nor be traitor for one who deceives a friend. I shall go from here. Perhaps when you are married to Mr. Macdonald you will have room in your kitchen for me?"

"We must not build on shadows, Maggie."

"And there is that Alvino, a cunning man in a

garden. You should see how he charms the flowers and vegetables — but you have seen, it is his work here, all this is his work."

"If there is ever a home of my own — if it ever comes to that happiness — "

"God hasten the day!"

"Then there will be room for both of you, Maggie."

Frances rose from the table, and stood looking though the window where the sun's friendly hand had reached in to caress her a few minutes gone. There was no gleam of it now, only a dull redness on the horizon where it had fallen out of sight, the red of iron cooling upon the anvil.

"In four weeks he will be able to kneel at the altar with you," said Maggie, making a clatter with the stove lids in her excitement, "and in youth that is only a day. And I have a drawn piece of fine linen, as white as your bosom, that you must wear over your heart on that day. It will bring you peace, for it was made by a holy sister and it has been blessed by the bishop at Guadalupe."

"Thank you, Maggie. If that day ever comes for me, I will wear it."

Maggie came nearer the window, concern in her homely face, and stood off a little respectful distance.

"You want to be with him, you should be there at his side, and I will open the door for you," she said.

"You will?" Frances started hopefully.

"Once inside, no man would lift a hand to put you out."

"But how am I going to get inside, Maggie, with that sentry at the door?"

"I have been thinking how it could be done, miss. Soon it will be dark, and with night comes fear. Miss is with him now; she is there alone."

Frances turned to her, such pain in her face as if she had been stabbed.

"Why should you go over that again? I know it!" she said, crossly. "That has nothing to do with my going into the room."

"It has much," Maggie declared, whispering now, treasuring her plot. "The old one is upstairs, sleeping, and she will not wake until I shake her. Outside the soldiers make their fires and cook, and Alvino in the barn sings 'La Golondrina'—you hear him?—for that is sad music, like his soul. Very well. You go to your room, but leave the door open to let a finger in. When it is just creeping dark, and the soldiers are eating, I will run in where the one sits beside the door. My hair will be flying like the mane of a wild mare, my eyes bi-i-i-g—so. In the English way I will shout 'The rustlers, the rustlers! He ees comin'—help, help! When you hear this, fly to me, quick, like a soul set free. The soldier at the door will go to see; miss will come out; I will stand in the door, I will draw the key in my hand. Then you will fly to him, and lock the door!"

"Why, Maggie! what a general you are!"

"Under the couch where he lies," Maggie hurried on, her dark eyes glowing with the pleasure of this manufactured romance, "are the revolvers which he wore, just where we placed them last night. I pushed them back a little, quite out of sight, and nobody knows. Strap the belt around your waist, and defy any power but death to move you from the man you love!"

"Maggie, you are magnificent!"

"No," Maggie shook her head, sadly, "I am the daughter of a peon, a servant to bear loads. But"—a flash of her subsiding grandeur—"I would do that—ah, I would have done that in youth—for the man of my heart. For even a servant in the back of a house has a heart, dear miss."

Frances took her work-rough hands in her own; she pressed back the heavy black hair—mark of a vassal race—from the brown forehead and looked tenderly into her eyes.

"You are my sister," she said.

Poor Maggie, quite overcome by this act of tenderness, sank to her knees, her head bowed as if the bell had sounded the elevation of the host.

"What benediction!" she murmured.

"I will go now, and do as you have said."

"When it is a little more dark," said Maggie, softly, looking after her tenderly as she went away.

Frances left her door ajar as Maggie had directed, and stood before the glass to see if anything could be done to make herself more attractive in his

eyes. It did not seem so, considering the lack of embellishments. She turned from the mirror sighing, doubtful of the success of Maggie's scheme, but determined to do her part in it, let the result be what it might. Her place was there at his side, indeed; none had the right to bar her his presence.

The joy of seeing him when consciousness flashed back into his shocked brain had been stolen from her by a trick. Nola had stood in her place then. She wondered if that slow smile had kindled in his eyes at the sight of her, or whether they had been shadowed with bewilderment and disappointment. It was a thing that she should never know.

She heard Mrs. Chadron leave her room and pass heavily downstairs. Hope sank lower as she descended; it seemed that their simple plot must fail. Well, she sighed, at the worst it could only fail. As she sat there waiting while twilight blended into the darker waters of night, she reflected the many things which had overtaken her in the two days past. Two incidents stood out above all the haste, confusion, and pain which gave her sharp regret. One was that her father had parted from her to meet his life's heaviest disappointment with anger and unforgiving heart; the other that the shot which she had aimed at Saul Chadron had been cheated of its mark.

There came a trampling of hoofs from the direction of the post, unmistakably cavalry. She strained from the window to see, but it was at that period

between dusk and dark when distant objects were tantalizingly indefinite. Nothing could be made of the number, or who came in command. But she believed that it must be Major King's troops returning from escorting the raiders to Meander.

Of course there would be no trying out of Maggie's scheme now. New developments must come of the arrival of Major King, perhaps her own removal to the post. Surely he could not sustain an excuse that she was dangerous to his military operations now.

Doors opened, and heavy feet passed the hall. Presently all was a tangle of voices there, greetings and warm words of welcome, and the sound of Mrs. Chadron weeping on her husband's breast for joy at his return.

Nola's light chatter rose out of the sound of the home-coming like a bright thread in a garment, and the genteel voice of Major King blended into the bustle of welcome with its accustomed suave placidity. Frances felt downcast and lonely as she listened to them, and the joyous preparations for refreshing the travelers which Mrs. Chadron was pushing forward. They had no regard, no thought it seemed, for the wounded man who lay with only the thickness of a door dividing him from them.

She was moved with concern, also, regarding Chadron's behavior when he should learn of Macdonald's presence in that house. Would Nola have the courage to own her attachment then, and stand between the wrath of her father and his wounded enemy?

She was not to be spared the test long. There was the noise of Chadron moving heavily about, bestowing his coat, his hat, in their accustomed places. He came now into the dining-room, where the sentinel kept watch at Macdonald's door. Frances crept softly, fearfully, into the hall and listened.

Chadron questioned the soldier, in surprise. Frances heard the man's explanation of his presence before the door given in low voice, and in it the mention of Macdonald's name. Chadron stalked away, anger in the sound of his step. His loud voice now sounded in the room where the others were still chattering in the relief of speech after long silence. Now he came back to the guarded door, Nola with him; Mrs. Chadron following with pleading words and moanings.

"Dead or alive, I don't care a damn! Out of this house he goes this minute!" Chadron said.

"Oh, father, surely you wouldn't throw a man at death's door out in the night!"

It was Nola, lifting a trembling voice, and Frances could imagine her clinging to his arm.

"Not after what he's done for us, Saul — not after what he's done!" Mrs. Chadron sounded almost tearful in her pleading. "Why, he brought Nola home — didn't you know that, Saul? He brought her home all safe and sound!"

"Yes, he stole her to make that play!" Chadron said, either still deceived, or still stubborn, but in any case full of bitterness.

"I'll never believe that, father!" Nola spoke braver than Frances had expected of her. "But friend or enemy, common charity, common decency, would—"

"Common hell! Git away from in front of that door! I'm goin' to throw his damned carcass out of this house—I can't breathe with that man in it!"

"Oh, Saul, Saul! don't throw the poor boy out!" Mrs. Chadron begged.

"Will I have to jerk you away from that door by the hair of the head? Let me by, I tell you!"

Frances ran down stairs blindly, feeling that the moment for her interference, weak as it might be, and ineffectual, had come. Now Major King was speaking, his voice sounding as if he had placed himself between Chadron and the door.

"I think you'd better listen to your wife and daughter, Chadron. The fellow can't harm anybody—let him alone."

"No matter for the past, he's our guest, father, he's—"

"Hell! Haven't they told you fool women the straight of it yet? I tell you I had to shoot him to save my own life—he was pullin' a gun on me, but I beat him to it!"

"Oh Saul, my Saul!" Mrs. Chadron moaned.

"Was it you that—oh, was it you!" There was accusation, disillusionment, sorrow—and more than words can define—in Nola's voice. Frances waited to hear no more. In a moment she was standing in

the open door beside Nola, who blocked it against her father with outstretched arms.

Chadron was facing his wife, his back to Frances as she passed.

"Yes, it was me, and all I'm sorry for is that I didn't finish him on the spot. Here, you fellers"—to some troopers who crowded about the open door leading to the veranda—"come in here and carry out this cot."

But it wasn't their day to take orders from Chadron; none of them moved. Frances touched Nola's arm; she withdrew it and let her pass.

Macdonald, alone in the room, had lifted himself to his elbow, listening. Frances pressed him back to his pillow with one hand, reaching with the other under the cot for his revolvers. Her heart jumped with a great, glad bound, as if it had leaped from death to safety, when she touched the weapons. A cold steadiness settled over her. If Saul Chadron entered that room, she swore in her heart that she would kill him.

"Don't interfere with me, King," said Chadron, turning again to the door, "I tell you he goes, alive or dead. I can't breathe—"

"Stop where you are!" Frances rose from her groping under the cot, a revolver in her hand.

Chadron, who had laid hold of Nola to tear her from the door, jumped like a man startled out of his sleep. In the heat of his passion he had not noticed one woman more or less.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said, catching himself as his hand reached for his gun.

"Frances will take him away as soon as he's able to be moved," said Nola, pleading, fearful, her eyes great with the terror of what she saw in Frances' face.

"Yes, she'll go with him, right now!" Chadron declared. "I'll give you just ten seconds to put down that gun, or I'll come in there and take it away from you! No damn woman—"

A loud and impatient summons sounded on the front door, drowning Chadron's words. He turned, with an oath, demanding to know who it was. Frances, still covering him with her steady hand, heard hurrying feet, the door open, and Mrs. Chadron exclaiming and calling for Saul. The man at the door had entered, and was jangling his spurs through the hall in hasty stride. Chadron stood as if frozen in his boots, his face growing whiter than wounded, blood-drained Macdonald's on his cot of pain.

Now the sound of the newcomer's voice rose in the hall, loud and stern. But harsh as it was, and unfriendly to that house, the sound of it made Frances' heart jump, and something big and warm rise in her and sweep over her, dimming her eyes with tears.

"Where's my daughter, Chadron, you cutthroat! Where's Miss Landcraft? If the lightest hair of her head has suffered, by God! I'll burn this house to the sills!"

CHAPTER XXII

PAID

COLONEL LANDCRAFT stood before Chadron in his worn regimentals, his old campaign hat turned back from his forehead as if he had been riding in the face of a wind. Macdonald, looking up at Frances from his couch, spoke to her with his eyes. There was satisfaction in them, a triumphant glow. She moved a step toward the door, and the colonel, seeing her there, rushed to her and clasped her against his dusty breast.

"Standing armed against you in your own house, before your own wife and daughter!" said he, turning like the old tiger that he was upon Chadron again. "And in the presence of an officer of the United States Army — my daughter, armed to protect herself! By heaven, sir! you've disgraced the uniform you wear!"

Major King, scowling darkly, dropped his hand in suggestive gesture to his sword. Colonel Landcraft, his slight, bony old frame drawn up to its utmost inch, marched to him, fire in his eye.

"Unbuckle that sword! You're not fit to wear it," said he.

Chadron had drawn away from the door of Macdonald's room a little, and stood apart from Major King with his wife and daughter. The cattleman

had attempted no defense, had said no word. In the coming of Colonel Landcraft, full of authority, strong and certain of hand, Chadron appeared to know that his world was beginning to tumble about his ears.

Now he stepped forward to interpose in behalf of his tool and co-conspirator, in one last big bluff. Major King fell back a stride before the charge of the infuriated old colonel, which seemed to have a threat of personal violence in it, the color sinking out of his face, his hand still on his sword.

"What authority have you got to come into my house givin' orders?" Chadron wanted to know. "Maybe your bluffin' goes with some people, but it don't go with me. You git to hell out of here!"

"In your place and time I'll talk to you, you sneaking hound!" Colonel Landcraft answered, throwing Chadron one blasting look. "Take off that sword, surrender those arms! You are under arrest." This to Major King, who stood scowling, watching the colonel as if to ward an attack.

"By whose authority do you make this demand?" questioned Major King, insolently. "I am not aware that any command—"

Colonel Landcraft turned his back upon him and strode to the open door, through which the dismounted troopers could be seen standing back a respectful distance in the shaft of light that fell through it. At his appearance there, at the sight of that old battered hat and familiar uniform, the

men lifted a cheer. Little tyrant that he was, hard-handed and exacting, they knew him for a soldier and a man. They knew, too, that their old colonel had not been given a square deal in that business, and they were glad to see him back.

The colonel acknowledged the greeting with a salute, his old head held prouder at that moment than he ever had carried it in his life.

"Sergeant Snow!" he called.

The sergeant hurried forward, stepped out into the light, came up at salute with the alacrity of a man who found pleasure in the service to be demanded of him.

"Bring a detail of six men into this room, disarm Major King, and place him under guard."

The colonel wheeled again to face Chadron and King.

"I am not under the obligation of explaining my authority to enter this house to any man," said he, "but for your satisfaction, madam, and in deference to you, Miss Chadron, I will tell you that I was recalled by the department on my way to Washington and sent back to resume command of Fort Shakie."

Chadron was biting his mustache like an angry horse mouthing the bit. In the background a captain and two lieutenants, who had arrived with Chadron and King, stood doubtful, it seemed, of their part in that last act of the cattleman's rough melodrama.

Frances had returned to Macdonald's side, fearful that the excitement might bring on a hemorrhage in his wound. She stood soothing him with low, soft, and unnecessary words, unconscious of their tenderness, perhaps, in the stress of her anxiety. But that they were appreciated was evident in the slow-stealing smile that came over his worn, rugged face like a breaking sun.

Major King surrendered his arms to the sergeant with a petulant, lofty shrug of his shoulders.

"I'm not through with you yet, you old cuss!" said Chadron. "I never started out to git a man but what I got him, and I'll git you. I'll —"

Chadron's voice caught in his throat. He stood there looking toward the outside door, drawing his breath like a man suffocating. Stealthily his hand moved toward his revolver, while his wife and daughter, even Frances, struck by a thrill of some undefined terror, leaned and looked as Chadron was looking, toward the open door.

A tall, gaunt, dark shaggy man was standing there, an old flapping hat drooping over his scowling eyes. He was a man with a great branching mustache, and the under lid of one eye was drawn down upon his cheek in a little point, as if caught by a surgical hook and held ready for the knife; a man who bent forward from the middle, as if from long habit of skulking under cover of low-growing shrubs; an evil man, whose foul soul cried of bloody deeds through every feature of his leering face.

"Oh, that man! that man!" cried Nola, in fearful, wild scream.

Mrs. Chadron clasped her in her arms and turned her defiant face toward the man in the door. He was standing just as he had stood when they first saw him, silent, still; as grim as the shadow of Saul Chadron's sins.

The soldiers who stood around Major King looked on with puzzled eyes; Colonel Landcraft frowned. Macdonald from his cot could not see the door, but he felt the sharp striking of those charged seconds. Chadron moved to one side a little, his fixed eyes on the man in the door, his hand nearer his revolver now; so near that his fingers touched it, and now it was in his hand with a sudden bright flash into the light.

Two shots in that quiet room, one following the other so closely that they seemed but a divided one; two shots, delivered so quickly after Nola's awful scream that no man could whip up his shocked nerves to obedience fast enough to interpose. Saul Chadron pitched forward, his hands clutching, his arms outspread, and fell dead, his face groveling upon the floor. Outside, the soldiers lifted Mark Thorn, a bullet through his heart.

CHAPTER XXIII

TEARS IN THE NIGHT

THEY buried Saul Chadron next day in a corner of the garden by the river. And there was the benediction of tender autumn sunshine over the place where they laid him down, away from the turmoil of his life, and the tangle of injustices that he left behind.

But there was none to come forward and speak for the body of Mark Thorn. The cowboys hid him in the sage at the foot of a butte, as men go silently and shadow-like to bury away a shame.

There seemed to be a heart-soreness over the ranchhouse by the river as night fell upon it again. Saul Chadron had been a great and noble man to some who wept in its silent rooms as the gloaming deepened into darkness over the garden, where the last leaves of autumn were tugging at their anchorage to sail away. Even Frances Landcraft in her vigil beside Macdonald's cot felt pity for Chadron's fall. She regretted, at least, that he had not gone out of life more worthily.

Colonel Landcraft had gone up the river to carry a new message to the homesteaders whose houses lay in ashes. He had ridden to tell them that they could build in security and live in peace. The surgeon had returned to the post, but was coming again tomor-

row. Behind him he had left the happy assurance that Macdonald would live.

Macdonald himself had added his own brave word to bear out the doctor's prediction, as far as Frances would permit him to speak. That was not above ten words, whispered into her ear, inclined low to hear. When he attempted to go beyond that, soft warm fingers made a latch upon his lips.

Mrs. Chadron came down a little after dark, and whispered at the door. Macdonald was sleeping, and Frances went softly to tell her.

"Nola's askin' for you," Mrs. Chadron told her, "she's all heartbroke and moanin' in her bed. If you'll go to her, and comfort her a little, honey, I'll take as good care of him as if he was my own."

Frances was touched by the appeal for sympathy. She could picture Nola, little fashioned by nature or her life's experiences to bear grief, shuddering and sobbing alone in the dark, and her heart went out to her in all its generosity and large forgivingness.

Nola's room was dark for all except the night sky at her window. Frances stood a moment in her door, listening, believing from the silence that she must have gone to sleep.

"Nola," she whispered, softly.

A little shivering sob was the answer. Frances went in, and closed the door. Nola was lying face downward on her pillow, like a child, and Frances found on putting out her comforting hand that the fickle little lady's bolster was wet with tears. She

sat on the bedside and tried gently to turn Nola's face toward her. That brought on a storm of tears and moanings, and agonized burrowing of her face into the pillow.

"Oh, I feel so mean and wicked!" she cried. "If I hadn't been so deceitful and treacherous and — and — everything, maybe all this sorrow wouldn't have come to us!"

Frances said nothing. She had found one hot hand, tear-wet from lying under Nola's cheek, and this she held tenderly, feeling it best to let the tears of penitence purge the sufferer's soul in their world-old way. After a time Nola became quieter. She shifted in the bed, and moved over to give Frances more room, and put up her arms to draw her friend down for the kiss of forgiveness which she knew would not be denied.

Afterwards she sat up in bed, and brushed her hair back from her throbbing forehead with her palms.

"Oh, it aches and aches — *so!*" she said.

"I'll bind a cold towel around it, dear; that always used to ease it, you remember?"

"Not my head, Frances — my heart, my heart!"

It was better so, Frances understood. Penitence that brings only a headache is like plating over brass; it cannot long conceal the baseness of the thing that lies beneath.

"Time is the only remedy for that, Nola," she said, her own words slow and sad.

"Do you think I've sinned past forgiveness be-

cause I—because—I love him?" Nola's voice trembled with earnestness.

"He is free, to love and be loved as it may fall, Nola. I told you he was mine, but I thought then that I was claiming him from death. He will live. He never has asked me to marry him; maybe he never will. When he recovers, he may turn to you—who can tell?"

"No, it's only you that he thinks of, Frances. When I was watching by him he opened his eyes, and you should have seen the look in them when he saw me instead of you. He struggled to sit up and look for you, and he called your name, sharp and frightened, as if he thought somebody had taken you away from him forever."

Frances did not need that assurance to quiet any fear of his loyalty. She had spoken the truth, only because it was the truth, but not to give Nola hope. For hope she knew there was not any, nor any love, to come to Nola out of that man's heart.

"We'll not talk of it," Frances said.

"I must, I can't let anything stand between us, Frances. If I'd been fair, all the way through—but I wasn't. I wasn't fair about Major King, and I wasn't fair this time. I was fool enough to think that if you were out of the way for a little while I could make him love me! He'd never love me, never in a million years!"

Frances said nothing. But she was beginning to doubt the sincerity of Nola's repentance. There, un-

der the shadow of her bereavement, she could think of nothing but the hopelessness of love.

"But I didn't want you to come up just to pet me and be good to me, Frances — I wanted to give you something."

Nola felt under her pillow, and groped for Frances' hand, in which she placed a soft something with a stub of a feather in it.

"I have no right to keep it," said Nola. "Do you know what it is?"

"Yes, I know."

Much of the softness which Frances had for the highland bonnet was in her voice as she replied, and the little bonnet itself was being nestled against her cheek, as a mother cuddles a baby's hand.

"The best that's in me goes out to that man," said Nola solemnly — and truthfully, Frances knew — "but I wouldn't take him from you now, Frances, even if I could. I don't want to care for him, I don't want to think of him. I just want to think of poor father lying out there under the ground."

"It's best for you to think of him."

"Only a day ago he was alive and warm, like you and me, and now he's dead! Mother never will want to leave this place again now, and I don't feel like I want to either. I just want to lie down and die — oh, I just want to die!"

Pity for herself brought Nola's tears gushing again, and her choking sobs into her throat. Her voice was hoarse from her lamentations; there seemed

to be only sorrow for her in every theme. Frances held her shivering slim body in her supporting arm, and Nola's face bent down upon her shoulder. It seemed that her renunciation was complete, her regeneration undeniable. But Frances knew that a great flood of tears was required to put out the fire of passion in a woman's heart. One spark, one little spark, might live through the deluge to spring into the heat of the past under the breath of memory.

Again the heaving breast grew calm, and the tear-wet face was lifted to shake back the fallen hair.

"This has emptied everything out for me," Nola sighed. "I'm going to be serious in everything, with everybody, after this. Do you suppose Mrs. Mathews would let me help her over at the mission — if I went to her meek and humble and asked her?"

"If she saw that it would help *you*, she would, Nola."

"Just think how lonesome it will be here when the post's abandoned and everybody but the Indians gone! You'll be away — maybe long before that — and I'll not see anybody but Indians and cowboys from year's beginning to year's end. Oh, it will be so dreary and lonesome here!"

"There's work up the river in the homesteaders' settlement, Nola; there's suffering to be relieved, and bereaved hearts to be comforted. There's your work, it seems to me, for you and those nearest to you are to blame for the desolation of those poor homes, excuse it as charitably as we may."

Frances felt a shudder run through the girl's body as her arm clasped the pliant waist.

"Why, Frances! You can't mean that! They're terrible — just think what they've done — oh, the underhanded thieves! By the law of the range it's my fight now, instead of my work to help them!"

"The law of the range isn't the law any longer here, Nola, and it never will be again. Alan Macdonald has done the work that he put his lone hand to. You have no quarrel with anybody, child, no feud to carry on to a bloody end. Put it out of your mind. If you are sincere in your heart, and truly penitent, you can prove it best by beginning to do good in the place where your house has done a terrible, sad wrong."

"They started it!" said Nola, vindictively, the lifelong hatred for those who encroached upon the range so deep in her breast, it seemed, that the soil of her life must come away on its roots.

"There's no use talking to you about it, then," said Frances, coldly.

Nola seemed hurt by her tone. She began to cry again, and plead her cause in moaning, broken words. "It's our country, we were here first — father always said that!"

"I know."

"But I don't blame Mr. Macdonald, they deceived him, the rustlers deceived him and told him lies. He didn't belong to this country, he couldn't know at first, or understand. Frances" — she put her hand

on her friend's shoulder, and lifted her head as if trying to pierce the dark and look into her eyes — "don't you know how it was with him? He was too much of a man to turn his back on them, even when he found he was on the wrong side. A man like him *must* have understood it our way."

"What he has done in this country calls for no excuse," returned Frances, loftily.

"In your eyes and mine he wouldn't need any excuse for anything he might do," said Nola, with a sagacity unexpected. "We love him, and we'd love him, right or wrong. Well" — a sigh — "you've got a right to love him, and I haven't. I wouldn't try to make him care for me now if I could, for I'm different; I'm all emptied out."

"It takes more than you've gone through to empty a human life, Nola. But you have no right to love him; honor and honesty are in the way, friendship not considered at all. You'll spring up in the sun again after a little while, like fresh grass that's trodden on, just as happy and light-hearted as before. Let me have this one without any more interference — there are plenty in the world that you would stand heart-high to with your bright little head, just as well as Alan Macdonald."

"I can't give him up, the thought of him, and the longing for him, without regret, Frances; I can't!"

"I wouldn't have you do it. I want you to have regret, and pain — not too deep nor too lasting, but some corrective pain. Now, go to sleep."

Frances pressed her back to the pillow, and touched her head with light caress.

"Frances," she whispered, a new gladness dawning in her voice, "I'll go and see those poor people, and try to help them — if they'll let me. Maybe we *were* wrong — partly, anyhow."

"That's better," Frances encouraged.

"And I'll try not to care for him, or think about him, even one little bit."

Frances bent and kissed her. Nola's arms clung to her neck a little, holding her while she whispered in her ear.

"For I'm going to be different, I'm going to be good — abso-*lutely* good!"

CHAPTER XXIV

BANJO FACES INTO THE WEST

"YOU don't tell me? So the old colonel's got what his heart's been pinin' for many a year. Well, well!"

Mrs. Chadron was beside her window in her favored rocker again, less assertive of bulk in her black dress, not so florid of face, and with lines of sadness about her mouth and eyes. A fire was snapping in the chimney, for the gray sky was driving a bitter wind, and the first snowflakes of winter were straying down.

Banjo Gibson was before the fire, his ears red, his cheeks redder, just in from a brisk ride over from the post. His instruments lay beside him on the floor, and he was limbering his fingers close to the blaze.

"Yes, he's a brigamadier now," said he.

"Brigadier-General Landcraft," said she, musingly, looking away into the grayness of the day; "well, maybe he deserves it. Fur as I'm concerned, he's welcome to it, and I'm glad for Frances' sake."

"He's vinegar and red pepper, that old man is! Takin' him up both sides and down the middle, as the feller said, I reckon the colonel — or brigamadier, I guess they'll call him now — he's about as good as

they make 'em. I always did have a kind of a likin' for that old feller — he's something like me."

"It was nice of you to come over and tell me the news, anyhow, Banjo; you're always as obligin' and thoughtful as you can be."

"It's always been a happiness and a pleasure, mom, and I've come a good many times with news, sad and joyful, to your door. But I reckon it'll be many a long day before I come ridin' to Alamito with news ag'in; many a long, long day."

"What do you mean, Banjo? You ain't goin' — "

"To Californy; startin' from here as soon as my horse blows a spell and eats his last feed at your feed box, mom. I've got to make it to Meander to ketch the mornin' train."

"Oh, Banjo! you don't tell me!" Tears gushed to Mrs. Chadron's eyes, used to so much weeping now, and her lips trembled as she pressed them hard to keep back a sob. "You're the last friend of the old times, the last face outside of this house belongin' to the old days. When you're gone my last friend, the very last one I care about outside of my own, 'll be gone!"

Banjo cleared his throat unsteadily, and looked very hard at the fire for quite a spell before he spoke.

"The best of friends must part," he said.

"Yes, they must part," she admitted, her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, her voice muffled behind it.

"But they ain't no use of me stayin' around in this country and pinin' for what's gone, and starvin' on the edge," said Banjo, briskly. "Since you've sold out the cattle and the boys is all gone, scattered ever-which-ways and to Texas, and the homesteaders is comin' into this valley as thick as blackbirds, it ain't no place for me. I don't mix with them kind of people, I never did. You've give it all up to 'em, they tell me, but this homestead, mom?"

"All but the homestead," she sighed, her tears checked now, her eyes on the farthest hill, where she had watched the crest many and many a time for Saul to rise over it, riding home from Meander.

"You hadn't ort to let it go," said he, shaking his sad head.

"I couldn't 'a' held it, the lawyers and Mr. Macdonald told me that. It's public land, Banjo, it belongs to them folks, I reckon. But we was here first!" A futile sigh, a regretful sigh, a sigh bitter with old recollections.

"I reckon that's so, down to the bottom of it, but you folks made this country what it was, and by rights it's yourn. Well, I stopped in to say good-bye to the old brigamadier-colonel over at the post as I come through. He tells me Alan and that little girl of hisn that stuck to him and stood up for him through thick and thin 're goin' to be married at Christmas time."

"Then they'll be leavin', too," she said.

"No, they're goin' to build on his ranch up the

river and stay here, and that old brigamadier-colonel he's goin' to take up land next to 'em, or has took it up, one of the two, and retire from the army when they're married. He says this country's the breath of his body and he couldn't live outside of it, he's been here so long."

"Well, well!" said she, her face brightening a little at the news.

"How's Alan by now?"

"Up and around — he's goin' to leave us in the morning."

"Frances here?" he asked.

"No, she went over home this morning — I thought maybe you met her — but she's comin' back for him in the morning."

Banjo sat musing a little while. Then —

"Yes, you'll have neighbors, mom, plenty of 'em. A colony of nesters is comin' here, three or four hundred of 'em, they tell me, all ready to go to puttin' up schoolhouses and go to plowin' in the spring. And they're goin' to run that hell-snortin' railroad right up this valley. I reckon it'll cut right along here somewheres a'past your place."

"Yes, changes 'll come, Banjo, changes is bound to come," she sighed.

"All over this country, they say, the nesters 'll squat now wherever they want to, and nobody won't dast to take a shot at 'em to drive 'em off of his grass. They put so much in the papers about this rustlers' war up here that folks has got it

through 'em the nesters ain't been gittin' what was comin' to 'em. The big ranches 'll all be split up to flinders inside of five years."

"Yes, the cattle days is passin', along with the folks that was somebody in this country once. Well, Banjo, we had some good times in the old days; we can remember them. But changes will come, we must expect changes. You don't need to pack up and go on account of that. I ain't goin' to leave."

"I've made up my mind. I'm beginnin' to feel tight in the chist already for lack of air."

Both sat silent a little while. Banjo's elbows were across his knees, his face lifted toward the window. The wind was falling, and there was a little breaking among the low clouds, baring a bit of blue sky here and there. Banjo viewed this brightening of the day with gladness.

"I guess it's passin'," he said, going to the window and peering round as much of the horizon as he could see, "it wasn't nothing but a little shakin' out of the tablecloth after breakfast."

"I'm glad of it, for I don't think it's good luck to start out on a trip in a storm. That there Nola she's out in it, too."

"Gone up the river?"

"Yes. It beats all how she's takin' up with them people, and them with her. She's even bought lumber with her own money to help some of 'em build."

"She's got a heart like a dove," he sighed.

"As soft as a puddin'," Mrs. Chadron nodded.

"But I never could git to it." Banjo sighed again.

Mrs. Chadron shook her head, with an expression of sadness for his failure which was deeper than any words she knew.

"The loss of her pa bore down on her terrible; she's pinin' and grievin' too hard for a body so young. I hear her cryin' and moanin' in the night sometimes, and I know it ain't no use goin' to her, for I've tried. She seems to need something more than an old woman like me can give, but I don't know what it is."

"Maybe she needs a change — a change of air," Banjo suggested, with what vague hope only himself could tell.

"Maybe, maybe she does. Well, you're goin' to take a change of air, anyhow, Banjo. But what're you goin' to do away out there amongst strangers?"

"I was out there one time, five years ago, and didn't seem to like it then. But since I've stood off and thought it over, it seems to me that's a better place for me than here, with my old friends goin' or gone, and things changin' this a-way. Out there around them hop and fruit ranches they have great times at night in the camps, and a man of my build can keep busy playin' for dances. I done it before, and they took to me, right along."

"They do everywheres, Banjo."

"Some don't," he sighed, watching out of the window in the direction that Nola must come.

"She's not likely to come back before morning — I

think she aims to go to the post tonight and stay with Frances," she said, reading his heart in his face.

"Maybe it's for the best," said Banjo.

"I guess everything that comes to us is for the best, if we knew how to take it," she said. "Well, you set there and be comfortable, and I'll stir Maggie up and have her make you something nice for dinner. After that I want you to play me the old songs over before you go. Just to think I'll never hear them songs no more breaks my heart, Banjo — plumb breaks my heart!"

As she passed Banjo she laid her hand on his head in a manner of benediction, and tears were in her eyes.

The sun was out again when they had finished lunch, coaxing autumn on into November at the peril of frosted toes. Mrs. Chadron had brightened considerably, also. Even bereavement and sorrow could not shake her fealty to chili, and now it was rewarding her by a rubbing of her old color in her face as she sat by the window and waited for Banjo to tune his instruments for the parting songs.

Her workbasket was beside her, the bright knitting-needles in the unfinished sock. It never would be completed now, she knew, but she kept it by her to cry over in the twilight hours, when thoughts of Saul came over her with their deep-harrowing pangs.

Banjo sang the touching old ballads over to her appreciative ear, watching the shadows outside, as he played, for three o'clock. That was the hour set for

him to go. "Silver Threads" was saved for the end, and when its last strain died Mrs. Chadron's face was hidden in her hands. She was rocking gently, her handkerchief fallen to the floor.

Banjo put his bow in its place in the lid of the case, the rosin in its little box. But the fiddle he still held on his knee, stroking its smooth back with loving hand, as if he would soothe Mrs. Chadron's regrets and longings and back-tugging pains by that vicarious caress. So he sat petting his instrument, and after a little she looked at him, her eyes red, and tear-streaks on her face.

"Don't put it away just yet, Banjo," she requested; "there's another one I want you to sing, and that will be the last. It's the saddest one you play — one that I couldn't stand one time — do you remember?" Banjo remembered; he nodded. "I can stand it now, Banjo; I want to hear it now."

Banjo drew bow again, no more words on either side, and began his song:

All o-lone and sad he left me,
But no oth-o's bride I'll be;
For in flow-os he bedecked me,
In tho cottage by tho sea.

When he finished, Mrs. Chadron's head was bent upon her arm across the little workstand where her basket stood. Her shoulders were moving in piteous convulsions, but no sound of crying came from her. Banjo knew that it was the hardest kind of weeping that tears the human heart.

He put away his fiddle, and strapped the case. Then he went to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"I'll have to be saddlin' up, mom," said he, his own voice thick, "and I'll say *adios* to you now."

"Good-bye, Banjo, and may God bless you in that country you're goin' to so fur away from the friends you used to know!"

Banjo's throat moved as he gulped his sorrow. "I'll not come back in the house, but I'll wave you good-bye from the gate," said he.

"I had hopes you might change your mind, Banjo," she said, as she took his hand and held it a little while.

"If I could 'a' got to somebody's heart that I've pined for many a day, I would 'a' changed my mind, mom. But it wasn't to be."

"It wasn't to be, Banjo," she said, shaking her head. "I don't think she'll ever marry — she's changed, she's so changed!"

"Well, *adios* to you, mom, and the best of luck."

"*Adios*, Banjo, boy; good-bye!"

She waited at the window for him to pass the gate. He appeared there leading his horse, and bent to examine the girths before putting foot to the stirrup. She hoped that he was coming back, to tell her that he could not find it in his heart to go. But no; the change that was coming over the cattle country was like an unfriendly wind to the little troubadour. His way was staked into the west where new ties

waited him, where new hearts were to be won. He mounted, turned to the window, waved his hat and rode away.

Mrs. Chadron sat in her old place and watched him until he passed beyond the last hill line and out of her sight. Her last glimpse of him had been in water lines through tears. Now she reached for her basket and took out her unfinished knitting. Broken off there, like her own life it was, she thought, never to be completed as designed. The old days were done; the promise of them only partly fulfilled. She was bidding farewell to more than Banjo, parting with more than friends.

"Good-bye, Banjo," she murmured, looking dimly toward the farthest hill; "*adios!*"

CHAPTER XXV

"HASTA LUEGO"

FRANCES came into the room as fresh as a morning-glory. Her cheeks were like peonies, and the fire of her youth and strength danced in her happy eyes. Macdonald rose to greet her, tall, gaunt, and pale from the drain that his wound had made upon his life. He had been smoking before the fireplace, and he reached up now to put his pipe away on the manteltree.

"And how are things at the post?" he asked, as she stood before him in her saddle dress, her sombrero pressing down her hair, her quirt swinging by its thong from her gloved wrist.

Before replying she intercepted the hand that was reaching to stow the pipe away, pressed it firmly back, inserted the stem between his close lips.

"In this family, the man smokes," she said.

His slow smile, which was reward enough to her for all the trouble that it took to wake it, twinkled in his eyes like someone coming to the window with a light.

"Then the piece of a man will go ahead and smoke," said he, drawing a chair up beside his own and leading her to it with gentle pressure upon her hand.

"Has Mrs. Chadron been overfeeding you while I was gone? Did she give you chili?"

"She *offered* me chili, in five different dishes, which I, remembering the injunction, regretfully put aside.

"Well, they're coming with the ambulance, I rode on ahead, and you'll soon be beyond the peril of chili." She smiled as she looked up into his face, and the smile broadened into an outright laugh when she saw the little flitting cloud of vexation there.

"I could well enough ride," said he.

"The doctor says you could not."

"I'm as fit for the saddle this minute as I ever was in my life," he declared.

She made no reply to that in words. But there was tender pity in her caressing eyes as they measured the weakness of his thin arms, wasted down to tendon and bone now, it seemed. He would ride to the post, she knew very well, if permitted, and come through it without a murmur. But the risk would be foolish, no matter what his pride must suffer by going in a wagon.

"Have you heard the news from Meander?" she inquired.

"No, news comes slowly to Alamito Ranch, and will come slower now that Banjo is gone, Mrs. Chadron says. What's been happening at Meander?"

"They held their conventions there last week to nominate county officers, and what do you think? They've nominated you for something, for—for *what* do you suppose?"

"Nominated me? Who's nominated me?"

"Oh, one party or the other began it, and the other indorsed you, for — oh, it's — "

"For what, Frances?" he asked, laughter in his eyes at her unaccountable way of holding back on the secret.

"Why, for *sheriff!*" said she, with magnificent scorn.

Macdonald leaned back in his chair and laughed, the first audible sound of merriment that she ever had heard come from those stern lips. She looked at him with reproach.

"It should have been governor, the very least they could have done, decently!" She was full of feeling on the subject of what she believed to be his undervaluation.

Macdonald took her hand, the laughter dying out of his sober face.

"That's all in the different ways of looking at a man, *palomita,*" he said to her.

"But you look bigger than *sheriff* to anybody!" she replied, indignation large in her heart.

"In this country, Frances, a sheriff is a pretty sizable man," he said, his thoughtful eyes on the fire, "about the biggest man they can conceive, next only to the president himself. Up here in the cattle country the greatness of men is dimmed, their magnitude being measured by appreciable results. The offices of lawmaker, governor, and such as the outside world invest with their peculiar dignity, are

incidental, indefinite — all but negative, here. It's different with a sheriff. He's the man who comes riding with his guns at his side; they can see him perform. All the law that they know centers in him; all branches of government, as they understand his powers. Yes, a sheriff is something of a figure in this county, Frances, and to be nominated for that office by one party and indorsed by another is just about the biggest compliment a man can receive."

"But surely, Alan, you'll not accept it?"

"Why, I think so," he returned, thoughtfully. "I think I'd be worth more to this county as sheriff than I would be as — as governor, let us say."

"Yes, but they go shooting sheriffs," she protested.

"They'll not be doing so much careless and easy shooting around here since Colonel — Brigadier-General Landcraft — and that sounds more like his size, too — gave them a rubdown with the iron hand. The cattle barons' day is over; their sun went down when Mark Thorn brought the holy scare to Saul Chadron's door."

"Father is of the same opinion. Do you know, Alan, the whole story about that horrible old man Thorn is in the eastern papers?"

"Is it possible?"

"With a Cheyenne date-line," she nodded, "the whole story — who hired him to skulk and kill, and a list of his known crimes. Father says if there was anything lacking in the fight you made on the cattle-

men, this would finish them. It's a terrible story — poor Nola read it, and learned for the first time her father's connection with Thorn. She's humiliated and heartbroken over it all."

"With sufficient reason," he nodded.

"She's afraid her mother will hear of it in some way."

"She'll find it out in time, Frances; a thing like that walks on a man's grave."

"It will not matter so much after a while, after her first grief settles."

"Did Nola come back with you?"

"No, she went on to take some things to poor old Mrs. Lassiter. She never has recovered from the loss of her son — it's killing her by inches, Tom says. And you considering that office of sheriff!" She turned to him with censorious eyes as she spoke, as if struck with a pain of which he was the cause. "I tell you, you men don't know, you don't know! It's the women that suffer in all this shooting and killing — we are the ones that have to bear the sorrows in the night and watch through the uncertain days!"

"Yes," said he gently, "the poor women must bear most of this world's pain. That is why God made them strong above all his created things."

They sat in silence, thinking it over between them. Outside there was sunshine over the brown rangeland; within there dwelt the lifting confidence that their feet had passed the days of trouble and were entering the bounds of an enlarging peace.

"And Major King?" said he.

"Father has relented, as I knew he would, out of regard for their friendship of the past, and will not bring charges based on Major King's plottings with Chadron."

"It's better that way," he nodded. "Do you suppose there's nothing between him and Nola?"

"I think she'll have him after her grief passes, Alan."

"Better than he deserves," said he. "There's a lump of gold in that little lady's heart, Frances."

"There is, Alan; I'm glad to hear you say that." There was moisture in her tender eyes.

"There was something in that man, too," he reflected. "It's unfortunate that he allowed his desire to humiliate you and me to drive him into such folly. If he'd only have held those brigands here for the civil authorities, as I requested, we could have forgotten the rest."

"Yes, father says that would have saved him in his eyes, in spite of his scheming with Chadron against your life, and against father's honor and all that he holds sacred. But it's done, and he's genuinely despised in the service for it. And there's the ambulance coming over the hill."

"Ambulance for me!" said he, in disgust of his slow mending.

"Be glad that it isn't — oh, I shouldn't say that!"

"I am," said he, nodding his slow, grave head.

"We'll have to say good-bye to Mrs. Chadron,

said she, bustling around, or making a show of doing so to hide the tears which had sprung into her eyes at the thought that it might have been a different sort of conveyance coming to Alamito to take Alan Macdonald away.

"And to Alamito," said he, looking out into the frost-stricken garden with a tenderness in his eyes. "I shall always have a softness in my heart for Alamito, because it gave me you. That garden out there yielded me the dearest flower that any garden ever gave a man"—he took her hands, and folded them above his heart—"a flower with a soul in it to keep it alive forever."

She bowed her head as he spoke, as if receiving a benediction.

"I hate saying good-bye to Mrs. Chadron," she said, her voice trembling, "for she'll cry, and I'm afraid I'll cry, too."

"It will not be farewell, only *hasta luego*,* we can assure her of that. We'll be neighbors to her, for this is home, dear heart, this is our *val paraiso*."

"Our valley of paradise," she nodded, her hands reaching up to his shoulders and clinging there a moment in soft caress, "our home!"

His arm about her shoulders, he faced her to the window, and pointed to the hills, asleep now in their brown winter coat behind a clear film of smoky blue.

"I stood up there one evening, weighted down with

* For a little while.

guns and ammunition, hunting and hunted in the most desperate game I ever played," he said. "The sun was low over this valley, and Alamito was a gleam of white among the autumn gold. I was tired, hungry, dusty, thirsty and sore, and my heart was all but dead in its case. That was after you had sent me away from the post, scorned and half despised."

"Don't rebuke me for that night now, Alan," she pleaded, turning her pained eyes to his. "I have suffered for my injustice."

"It wasn't injustice, it was discipline, and it was good for both of us. We must come to confidence through misunderstandings and false charges very frequently in this life. Never mind that; I was telling you about that evening on the side of the hill. I had been sitting with my back to a rock, watching the brush for Mark Thorn, but I was thinking more of you than of him. For he meant only death, and you were life. But I thought that I had lost you that day."

She drew nearer to him as they stood, in the unequivocal consolation of her presence, in the most comforting refutation of that sad hour's dark forebodings.

"I thought that, until I stood up and started down the slope to go my lone-handed way. The sun struck me in the face then, and it was yellow over the valley, and the wind was glad. I knew then, when I looked out over it, that it held something for me, that it

was my country, and my home. The lines of gray old Joaquin Miller came to me, and lifted my heart in a new vision. I said them over to myself:

> Lo! these are the isles of the watery miles
> That God let down from the firmament.
> Lo! Duty and Love, and a true man's trust;
> Your forehead to God and your feet in the dust — "

only, there were two lines which I did not repeat, I dared not repeat, even in my heart. My vision halted short of their fulfillment."

"What are the words — do you remember them?" she asked.

"Yes; I can repeat them now, for my vision is broader, it is a better dream:

> Lo! Duty and Love, and a sweet babe's smiles,
> And there, O friend, are the Fortunate Isles."

He pressed her closer, and kissed her hair. They stood, unmindful of the waiting ambulance, their vision fusing in the blue distances of the land their hearts held dear. It was home.

"Come on, Alan" — she started from her reverie and drew him by the hand — "there's Mrs. Chadron on the porch, waiting for *hasta luego*."

"For *hasta luego*," said he.